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TAKING A STAND: RDDDC's Commitment to the Rochester Community

For over 400 years, the institutions, laws, systems and practices that have guided us in all aspects of our lives in this country have embedded structural racism. This has been the cause of racial disparities in healthcare, housing, education, workforce development, and every other fabric of our system. People of color in our community also experience lower average pay, higher unemployment, less personal wealth, and shorter life expectancies. We live in a very segregated community – we see it in our neighborhoods, and in the divide between city, suburban, and rural areas throughout our region. We see it in our schools, in the way we socialize, and in how we operate in our workplaces. But at its heart, this is not only about equality – it's about equity.

Systemic racism is everyone's problem. In Rochester's long history, we have gone through many episodes in the fight for racial equality and inclusion, yet progress has been slow at best. At this moment and going forward, we must act, stand with justice, and work with our broad base of community partners to start the process to unravel the endemic racism that has and continues to disproportionately hurt our city – emotionally, physically and economically. At RDDDC, we find these realities to be unacceptable, and today we are committing our organization to actively support the creation of equality and equity throughout our community.

RDDDC and its membership commit to a practice of not being silent and using our collective voice and influence to promote positive change in policies and practices that perpetuate systemic racism. Therefore, RDDDC commits to the following initial actions:

1. We will redouble our commitment to making the center of our city open and welcoming to all of our citizens, and to celebrating the diversity of Rochester's people inclusive of race, age, sexual orientation, disability, gender, religion, economic status, and other identities as it aligns with the twin values of inclusion and equity.
2. We will repudiate any form of racial injustice, hatred or bias, and pledge to speak up and speak out when we find evidence of such patterns or behavior in any part of our regional economic and social systems.
3. We have adopted equity, diversity and inclusion as core values in our organization. We now vow to become a more engaged partner as the community deepens its work to eradicate the racism and bias embedded in our community systems, programs and practices that perpetuate structural and systematic racism. We commit to using an equity and inclusion lens in RDDDC's work and to apply it to all of our projects and activities. We will also incorporate anti-racist principles within our organization, and in our public-facing work to redevelop downtown and grow the regional economy.

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4. To do this well, our leadership ranks must be deepened with more diverse voices, and those voices must be heard and have influence over the alignment of RDDC's strategic direction. To this end, we will seek to open the door to our boardroom which will broaden and diversify the voices that influence the way we develop growth strategies for the center city, identify and characterize important issues, and drive the organization's future priorities, actions and programming.
5. We will work harder to build alliances and partnerships with other organizations that are confronting racism. We will encourage our members, stakeholders, and other partners to recognize racism as a public health crisis and to understand the profound impact of racism on economic opportunities and outcomes. We will also begin a conversation with our members about how to more effectively and profoundly change these dynamics.
6. The criminal justice system disproportionately impacts people of color – particularly Black men. Racism is embedded in our policing system and in the judicial practices that continue to egregiously target and inequitably impact our citizens of color. RDDC commits to using its voice and influence in the business community to build support for both local and statewide efforts to reform these inherently unjust systems.
7. We recognize that the Rochester City School District is the single biggest investment our community makes. Its success or failure will be a major economic development issue affecting business retention and attraction. Moreover, the success of this institution significantly influences the economic prosperity that continues to be out of reach for so many Rochesterians of color. For these reasons, we pledge to become a voice for change and will actively work to engage the businesses and institutions that comprise RDDC's membership base in this community conversation.

To activate the above commitments, RDDC has already convened a special task force with ten of its Board members. The Board has authorized this group to map out the organization's next tangible actions and to begin moving them forward. As a first step to becoming an antiracist organization, RDDC's Board of Directors is formally endorsing the following declarations, projects and work:

1. Mayor Lovely Warren's recent commitment statement for the City of Rochester <https://www.facebook.com/114192652620/posts/10157186854327621/?vh=e&d=n>
2. Greater Rochester Black Agenda Group's "Racism is a Public Health Crisis" declaration <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSddsHA40lVULue5wIXDferezB8rdHKr1IXHxd1ADkvm9SldXg/viewform>
3. YWCA's "Stand Against Racism" <https://ywca.quorum.us/SAR/?>
4. Urban League of Rochester's "Interrupt Racism" <https://www.urbanleaguero.org/interruptracism>
5. Governor Andrew Cuomo's "Say Their Name" agenda for police reform in New York State <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-renews-call-passage-say-their-name-agenda-police-have-do-their-jobs-they-dont>

These past weeks, people in record numbers across the country have united in protest, anger and grief over the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers. Mr. Floyd's death is part

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of a tragic pattern with many other victims including Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, Manuel Ellis, Botham Jean, Trayvon Martin, Dreasjon Reed, Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor – and so many others. Black lives matter. In addition, the COVID crisis has glaringly exposed the impacts of sustained structural racism on public health outcomes which have impacted Black and Brown people more dramatically.

Supporting the “*Racism is a Public Health Crisis*” declaration by the Greater Rochester Black Agenda Group is a start, but it is not enough. Rectifying a system of structural racism will take much more than words. To initiate actions to move equity forward in our community, we must first hear and respect the voices of pain, loss, and fear. Our solutions and tactics must be born out of deep community collaborations and cross-racial partnerships. What we do next must be authentic and the result of listening to a diversity of voices and testimonials. Only then can we begin stripping our systems and practices of imbedded racism and begin the healing process. How we do this will define us for years to come.

During this heartbreaking time for our city and country, it is essential that we stand together as one community. RDDC deeply believes that equity, inclusion, and diverse leadership are the bedrocks of a just community. We need Rochester’s business, community, and government leaders to work collaboratively and proactively to publicly and visibly take necessary actions to overcome our historical biases and resolve to improve. Again, RDDC commits to an antiracist agenda to drive this process and pledges to be a strong partner in this effort as the community moves forward – together.

(RDDC – 6/25/20)