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Social and Economic Challenges Facing St. Louis and the Region

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I. INTRODUCTION

Good morning. Thank you very much for the opportunity to share with you today my thoughts about some of the challenges facing St. Louis and the region. Public policy and public policy issues of all kinds have been of great interest to me beginning with my days as an undergraduate at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton and at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard where I pursued an MPA in conjunction with a law degree from Harvard Law School. I guess you could say public policy is in my blood. Happy to be at the Weidenbaum Center; I feel right at home.

In my former life-life before the move to St. Louis, I practiced law in New York City. Before coming to St. Louis, I was Senior Counsel at the New York State Urban Development Corporation (UDC), a quasi-governmental, public benefit corporation that was part of Gov. Mario Cuomo's administration. UDC is best known for leading and overseeing the redevelopment of Times Square.

People often ask how I ended up in St. Louis. The short answer is: While I was out on a year-long maternity leave with our third child, my husband Kelvin Westbrook coaxed me into relocating with a promise of a "no longer than 3 years" stay. Well, it's 9 years later and guess who's still here!

Though I miss New York and look forward to the summer months when my family and I return there for extended time with family and friends, I very much enjoy living in St. Louis. This is a wonderful community and there are lots of great things going on here. In addition, on a personal note, St. Louis has afforded me a very unique experience: For the last 7 or 8 years, because of the generosity and encouragement of my husband and children, I am able to devote 100% of my professional time pro bono, and as a volunteer to initiatives and organizations that address issues about which I'm passionate. I currently sit on 10 or 11 boards, and chair the board of John Burroughs School.

It's through my participation as a full-time civic volunteer that I've gotten to know St. Louis, have formed opinions about the region's challenges, and personally attempt to help craft solutions to those challenges.

II. THE CHALLENGES

Before arriving in St. Louis, I had no predisposition about what I'd find when I got here. To be totally honest, I had a typical New Yorker's point of view: I thought I'd see a few more cows and cornfields, and, in fact, wondered if I'd really get to try out the overalls, straw hats and pitchforks that our wise-cracking New York friends had supplied us with as parting gifts.

The truth was, I had no idea what to expect from the community — my mind was a blank slate.

Once we arrived and began to settle in and become familiar with things, I have to concede that I was a bit surprised by some things that emerged. And the longer I was here, I began to understand the magnitude of the various challenges that confronted the region. The three things that stood out to me then — and I still see as most pressing — are the awkward nature of race relations, the crisis in education, and the uncoordinated approach to economic development and regional governance.

RACE

First the topic of race relations.

When we relocated, one of the first things that became obvious to me as an African-American accustomed to the cosmopolitan atmosphere of New York City, was that there was very limited diversity, and there was a glaring polarization of blacks and whites. I was to quickly learn that this was not just an issue in my neighborhood, but was pervasive throughout the region.

We built our home in West County in search of good public schools. We had no idea that in choosing that location we were virtually isolating ourselves from other blacks. It was eminently clear that African-Americans and whites didn't do much mixing — they didn't live together, they didn't socialize — there was very little interaction that I could detect.

As time wore on and I began to get involved in some of the region's prominent organizations, I noticed that there were very few blacks at any of the community's important tables. Nor was there significant inclusion of African-Americans in groups that were perceived as having the power to make decisions and the resources to back those decisions up. Freeman Bosley was the newly elected mayor and I thought it interesting that that fact didn't seem to narrow the racial divide. By and large, those in control were white and male. And, the same few blacks — and they were very few indeed — who were invited to participate appeared on everyone's list.

I should add that this notion of separation and division, though huge in terms of race, was not exclusive to it. St. Louis seemed to exist as a culture of fragmentation. Besides issues of black vs. white, there was city vs. county, north county vs. south county, north city vs. south city, nearly 100 municipalities, each operating and functioning as its own little fiefdom, and, of course, there were the "haves" and "have-nots."

In the midst of the fragmentation was a high degree of complacency, and to some extent, apathy. Despite widespread perceptions about the challenges around race and division, most people — black and white — have, until fairly recently, accepted the status quo. For some people, even still, racial polarization is not an issue they see as relevant to their lives. They don't see it as affecting them in any significant way. I believe most people do care and they find the situation to be embarrassing and uncomfortable. They just don't know what to do about it so whenever they can, they avoid it altogether.

EDUCATION

Another persistent challenge in St Louis is one that exists in most urban areas — the crisis in education. And here in the St Louis region, the disparity in educational opportunity is stark.

- **ST. LOUIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS (SLPS).** First, the entire system is in dire straits. 41 out of 63 elementary schools, 19 out of 20 middle schools, and 9 out of 10 high schools recently failed to show adequate progress in accordance with state standards on the Missouri Assessment Program tests — also known as the MAP tests. 81% of the children in the district are in poverty. There is an almost 50% mobility rate such that a teacher who starts with a group of 28 students in September can fully expect that by June, 14 of those students will have left and been replaced by 14 new students during the course of the year. The vast majority of children starting first grade are completely unprepared to begin school.
 - One need only read the newspaper to know the district is besieged with a myriad of academic woes, financial shortfalls, and ongoing debate as to how to proceed.
 - In the middle of all this are the scores of children who are not learning, progressing or getting an education that will fully prepare them for the future.
- **DESEGREGATION PROGRAM.** In addition to the SLPS, there is the voluntary inter-district transfer program. This program, which has existed for 20 years, grew out of complicated legal agreement between the state of Missouri, SLPS, and a number of county school districts in connection with the school desegregation case initiated in 1972. Though there are several hundred non-African-American students from St Louis county who transfer to magnet schools in the city, the crux of the program is the 10,000 African-American students who reside in the city and make the sacrifice of long bus rides out to various county school districts to gain access to what they hope will be higher quality educations.
 - For some students, when all the circumstances work optimally, participation in the de-seg program is a saving grace. For others, it is a nightmare.
 - In some instances, the receiving schools, teachers, families and students are not prepared to handle the cultural differences and economic disparities that are part of the transfer students' everyday lives.
 - Often, there are breakdowns in communication and misunderstandings. Transfer students are sometimes seen as presenting special disciplinary problems. And, though many students in the program perform better than their counterparts in the SLPS, there is still a significant achievement gap.

Additionally, families of transfer students have sometimes not been fully prepared to handle the extra demands that being in the program requires. Some are not in a position (due to jobs, lack of transportation) to participate fully by attending teacher conferences, school shows, sports events, etc. This creates tension with the school and is very difficult for children who see their classmates' parents at school on a consistent basis.

- Several participating districts are currently debating whether to continue in the program beyond 2005. At that time, under the settlement agreement that is in place, they have the option to stop accepting students and to begin the gradual process of winding the program down. The undecided nature of things creates its own set of problems.
- INDEPENDENT/PAROCHIAL SCHOOLS. For a privileged segment of our community, and for the few others who obtain admission and receive the necessary resources, the independent and parochial schools for which St. Louis is well known are the practical answer to the question of where to get the best education. In these institutions, educational excellence is the highest priority.
 - As the current Board Chair at John Burroughs School, I can personally attest to that goal.
 - I can also attest to the fact that schools like ours in St. Louis are very predominantly white.

I should note, though, that for the last 5 or 6 years, Burroughs has with great determination pursued the policy of valuing diversity by weaving it into the fabric of the school's culture and all aspects of the educational experience and by actively recruiting and admitting qualified students of color.

I can only speak for Burroughs in terms of its efforts and desires to extend the benefits of its outstanding education to a broad range of students, but I assume other private schools share that interest.

The problem is, because of the relatively small sizes of such schools and the small numbers of students admitted each year, they can have only limited impact on the difficult issue of wide scale educational equity.

The fact is, based on the disparate nature of educational opportunities in the St. Louis region, as between the city public schools, the voluntary busing program in the county and the limited openings available in the private schools, we see being perpetuated for tomorrow's generation, the same division and separation — much of it based on race and educational disparity — that is so obvious and detrimental today.

ECONOMICS

Another major challenge for St. Louis and the region that is exacerbated by the fragmentation and complacency I spoke of earlier, is the lack of a coordinated, regional approach to economic development and governance.

Few would argue with the fact that, in the last several years, there has been positive effort to stimulate development downtown and in other locations. The Washington Avenue loft district, Joe Edwards' efforts here in the University City loop, the St. Louis Mills Mall in Hazelwood and the Westfield Mall in Des Peres are evidence of that fact. And there are numerous other projects being contemplated.

However, our failure to plan these projects with an overarching view of the region's needs and future development options radically affects our long term ability to make the most of our resources and to compete effectively with other regions in courting new businesses and industries to locate here.

Currently, we have a tangle of local governments — over 90 separate municipalities in St. Louis alone — each with its own police department, fire district, sanitation, emergency medical and a host of other services. Each municipality operates within its own sphere and pursues its own agenda, governing, taxing, subsidizing and spending largely in a vacuum.

Because individual jurisdictions spend their resources according to local plans based on a combination of fiscal factors and community goals, the quality and quantity of services vary significantly from one community to another. In Ballwin, for instance, there are two community water-themed recreation centers, while Town &Country has no recreation center at all.

And, some communities — invariably white and more affluent — have far more resources than others — more often than not, black and less affluent. It is no wonder, then, that we have a growing underclass of communities that will never be able to afford basic services, that will not be able to contribute economically to the region, and where the children growing up will be at a continuing disadvantage.

Our parochial approach to development and governance also compromises whatever larger goals could be achieved throughout the region and downtown.

The focus on our own backyards never enables us to concentrate on what the big picture could look like if there were a cooperative, coordinated plan or effort.

III. CHALLENGES SUMMARIZED

So in St. Louis, when we consider the issues of race, education and economic development, we, in effect, have a huge conundrum: each of these challenges independently has no easy solution. The fact that they are so intertwined and interconnected compounds the situation and only adds to their complexity.

IV. MEETING THE CHALLENGES

What has been the response to these challenges around race, education and economic and regional development that I've outlined?

As I mentioned at the outset, when I arrived in St. Louis 9 years ago, I was not aware of any real response; my sense was that any efforts that were taking place were very low key. After I'd lived here a couple of years, and gotten involved in some key organizations like Confluence (predecessor of FOCUS St. Louis) and the Black Leadership Roundtable, and after being invited to join the Civic Progress Dialogue Committee, I began to notice an "awakening," the beginning of a community dialogue around these seemingly intractable challenges. There were many discussion tables, all of which were important. I will briefly touch upon three of them: one was the Peirce Report; another was St. Louis 2004; the third was the settlement effort around the school desegregation case.

PEIRCE REPORT

To most people, the Peirce Report was a signal that progress was achievable with respect to many of the region's challenges (including the ones I have identified here). The report thoroughly — and to my way of thinking, accurately — analyzed the state of affairs of the St. Louis region. It identified our assets, it outlined our problems, it offered us "best practices" that had been successful in our own and in other communities across the country. It essentially provided a blueprint for civic experimentation.

Many St. Louisans welcomed the sound advice of the two renowned urban experts, Neil Peirce and Curtis Johnson, who conducted the assessment. Others found it a frustrating exercise when it did not immediately produce comprehensive solutions to the region's racial, education, and economic development challenges.

What the Peirce Report irrefutably did foster, however, was extensive dialogue. In every organization in which I was involved, the main topic of conversation was the report and its take on the St. Louis region. And in some quarters, that was a novel discussion.

ST. LOUIS 2004

The launching of St. Louis 2004 was another major event for St. Louis. I remember the groundswell of enthusiasm and excitement around this brilliant and creative idea of conjuring a massive, inclusive brain trust of all the region's citizens, thinking outside the box for innovative ideas to address some of our toughest problems.

In fact, when the head of 2004, Senator Jack Danforth, asked me to lead the education division of the organization, I gladly accepted the assignment. I was already serving as legal counsel and advisor to his brother, Dr. William Danforth, in his role as Settlement Coordinator for the school desegregation case negotiations and thought that this would be a wonderful source for untapped thinking about the entrenched problems in education.

While 2004 was responsible for many impressive accomplishments in the region, including initiatives supporting downtown revitalization, workforce diversity, sustainable neighborhoods, and the establishment of riverfront trails for biking, walking and other recreational uses, some St. Louisans became disillusioned when their ideas and suggestions were passed over in favor of others. Other individuals fell away when they realized how much time and patience would be required to raise funds and to get buy-in for all the proposed

projects. Still others were discouraged that some goals were impractical and beyond our community's reach in the foreseeable future.

Despite what some people perceived as shortcomings in the 2004 process, no one could deny the tremendous momentum that was generated from engaging 10,000 citizens to submit and share their ideas, and to attend meetings and gatherings aimed at collective strategizing and decision-making for the betterment of the region.

DESEGREGATION SETTLEMENT NEGOTIATIONS

The settlement process in connection with the school desegregation case was another important milestone for St. Louis in terms of sparking community dialogue. As I outlined earlier, the voluntary interdistrict transfer program met with varying degrees of success and support and there was — and continues to be — ongoing debate as to the viability of the program.

Nonetheless, when the state of Missouri sought to end its involvement in the case in 1996, the court determined that, rather than issue a decision, it would first give the 21 parties involved in the case an opportunity to work things out among themselves under the supervision of the court-appointed Settlement Coordinator, Dr. Danforth.

During a three year period, the 21 parties — including the State, the plaintiffs, the SLPS, all of the participating county school districts, the NAACP, the Justice Department and the teachers' union — haggled away to decide whether to continue the program or to arrive at the terms for dismantling it.

In January 1999 a complicated settlement was reached that allowed for the program to continue for a number of years, but which also provided options exercisable by the county districts for phased withdrawal after several years.

While the settlement had its proponents, and there was unanimous agreement about the extraordinary skill Dr. Danforth exhibited in successfully commandeering an extremely difficult process wherein all 21 parties were actually able to find areas of consensus, the settlement agreement was also met with criticism for its failure to address even peripherally the merits of the transfer program — how to make it work given the existence of the issues around race, cultural difference, and economic disparity I discussed earlier.

What the critics failed to acknowledge, however, was the monumental accomplishment the idea of a settlement represented. A strong coalition of St. Louisans — blacks and whites, parents, teachers, community organizations like the Black Leadership Roundtable and Civic Progress, and city and county residents — worked together to facilitate a settlement. The settlement thus assumed an even greater importance than the legal miracle that it was: it was the successful departure from the old ways of division, separation and fragmentation deeply embedded in the regional culture.

V. SETTING A NEW STAGE

Indeed, this was the real significance of the Peirce Report and St. Louis 2004, as well. These 3 community experiences had a profound impact on reshaping our approach to confronting challenges around race, education and economic development and a host of other challenges. Each experience stimulated extensive community dialogue and was instructive as to the absolute importance and necessity of inclusiveness and collaboration. Each experience, in its own way, helped us see that combining our strengths and efforts will be the key to a prosperous, thriving future for our city and region.

VI. ONGOING SUCCESSFUL EFFORTS — SOME EXAMPLES

Since the time of the Peirce Report, St. Louis 2004 and the settlement of the school desegregation case, I have personally witnessed an undeniable, perceptible shift in the mindsets of the many organizations and initiatives in which I have been involved away from the culture of polarization and fragmentation that existed when I first moved to St. Louis, in favor of an environment that affirmatively seeks to draw diverse groups of people to the community table, and that fosters coordination, collaboration and combined effort.

I think the following examples document this perception and offer compelling evidence that the St. Louis community may finally be on the right track in developing and pursuing effective strategies for tackling the region's huge challenges around race, education and economic development.

There are several key, not-for-profit organizations in the region that have broad-based, widespread appeal and that are setting the agenda for change and engaging scores of citizens around these difficult issues. FOCUS St. Louis is among the most prominent of these organizations and has taken numerous steps to address the racial divide, the crisis in education and ill effects of uncoordinated economic development.

One such step was to convene a diverse citizens' task force a couple of years ago that, after 18 months of intense discussion and debate, issued a report entitled "Racial Equality in the St. Louis Region: A Community Call to Action." The report made numerous recommendations in the areas of housing, education and economics that are currently being implemented and monitored throughout the region. The report has received recognition throughout the country, and I would urge you to get a copy of it if you have not already done so.

The Regional Business Council is a consortium of CEOs of some of the region's largest mid-cap companies. The mission of RBC is to unite and engage its members to act on high impact business, civic and philanthropic affairs that will develop and sustain the St. Louis region as a highly competitive and world-class region. RBC works in collaboration with other groups to support regional governance issues, improve educational opportunities within the SLPS as well as in higher education, support business diversity issues and increase investment in the region.

The Bridges Across Racial Polarization Program is another very important initiative in St. Louis. Co-founded by the late Greg Freeman (who was black) and Dan Schesch (who is white),

it is a voluntary program consisting of groups of 8 to 12 people from a mix of racial and ethnic backgrounds that meet on a social basis every couple of months. Participants get to know people from other races whom they might not otherwise meet, to cross barriers, hear different ideas and perspectives and to provide a sounding board when divisive issues arise. About 400 people are regularly involved in groups that have formed, some of those groups being in schools, corporations and churches. Bridges was selected by the Pew Partnership not long ago as one of 19 important solutions for America.

The Metropolitan Forum is a new, but promising, collaboration convened jointly by RCGA, East-West Gateway, and FOCUS consisting of people from the business, civic and government sectors who share an interest in making the St. Louis region economically productive. Currently, the collaboration is developing a coordinated regional strategy for public spending and investment to address some of the issues around economic development about which I have spoken.

In the education sphere, the Black Leadership Roundtable (BLR) is leading a broad-based, coordinated effort of teachers, black and white parents and administrators around the single goal of reducing the achievement gap between white and African-American students in St. Louis city and county. At present, 18 out of 25 school districts have passed a resolution committing to this goal over the next few years. Also, the Roundtable recently received federal funding for a new Parent Empowerment and Engagement Center to assist in the achievement gap goal. The Center is also being funded by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and Civic Progress. It is important to note here that Civic Progress is participating in collaborative fashion with a BLR lead initiative. This is a significant change from the past where the effort would be led by Civic Progress with the Roundtable in a supporting role.

The Racial Equity Collaborative is a joint effort of RegionWise, the Aspen Institute, National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ), Anti-Defamation League (ADL), Diversity Awareness Partnership (DAP) and FOCUS designed to lead the community in understanding, articulating and implementing a racial equity agenda for the region. The goal is to raise awareness as to how structural racism adversely impacts the regional agenda.

Finally, the Diversity Awareness Partnership is a collaboration of 100 St. Louis organizations, businesses, and educational institutions as well as the Rams, Blues and Cardinals. Together, they promote the benefits and value of diversity throughout the region. DAP's effort is extensive, and one example of its reach, especially with youth, is the Give Respect, Get Respect program. 48 students in 24 area schools participate in a year-long anti-bias program with their mentors from Edward Jones (a DAP member). Mentors help groom the students to provide tangible leadership in the area of diversity back in their school communities.

VII. SUMMARY

This list of initiatives and organizations is by no means exhaustive — they serve as examples and evidence of what I see as an evolving approach to tackling what, I believe, are

some of St. Louis' biggest challenges: racial polarization, crisis in education and daunting economic issues.

The culture of fragmentation, division and complacency I perceived 9 years ago as a newcomer to the region is, slowly but surely, yielding to the recognition that inclusive, collaborative, coordinated actions and resources will be required to positively and meaningfully answer the challenges.

What is certain is that there is a long road ahead of us here in the St. Louis region and we have lots of work to do. I am both optimistic and confident that with all of us working together — the operative word is together — we can succeed in meeting the tasks.

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