

Waco City Council puts poverty issues on the front burner

By J.B. Smith Tribune-Herald staff writer

Wednesday September 22, 2010



[Email](#)



[Print](#)

Waco City Council on Tuesday put the issue of Waco's high poverty rate on the front burner — agreeing to develop an anti-poverty master plan with the help of charity leaders.

“Chronic poverty drags down our economy and stifles our potential for greatness,” reads a two-page statement that the council adopted Tuesday.

In the statement, the council members commit to develop and enact a 10-year master plan to battle poverty, similar to recent plans to improve education and reduce homelessness.

In coming months, a mayor's task force will work on the master plan, with the help of 17 graduate students from the Baylor University School of Social Work. City leaders said the plan could be ready next fall, and the city will likely hire a full-time anti-poverty coordinator.

The whole idea grew from a “Poverty Solutions Group,” headed by nonprofit veterans Kenneth Moerbe and Jimmy Dorrell, that has been discussing poverty issues with the council during the past year. They suggested that the city go on record putting poverty at the top of its priority list.

“It's extremely important that this be seen as a community-wide effort,” Moerbe told the council. “You represent the will of this community.”

Councilwoman Toni Herbert, who drafted the council's statement, said everyone agrees that tackling poverty isn't just about improving people's financial security but also includes improving their health and education levels.

She said there are plenty of nonprofit groups doing good work to battle poverty, but it's the city's place to bring all those efforts into a cohesive whole.

“Our nonprofit groups are just putting out fires,” she said. “No one has the resources to address this in a global way.”

Gaynor Yancey, associate dean of the Baylor School of Social Work, said the council's commitment will make a “huge” difference.

“This is extremely important — probably one of the most important things that has ever happened in Waco,” she said. “As a citizen of Waco, my reaction is, ‘This is exactly what we ought to be doing.’”

The goal of the master plan won't be to eradicate poverty but to make incremental progress each year.

The 2008 U.S. Census estimates for Waco showed a poverty rate above 27 percent, compared with a statewide average of 15.8 percent. Even after removing university students from the count of low-income people, the poverty rate is about 24 percent, city housing director Jeff Wall said.

"That's still astronomical," Councilman Randy Riggs said. "This is something that holds our community back."

The Poverty Solutions Group developed a list of 12 characteristics that Waco should work on to overcome poverty.

They include the following: improving the health of children, preparing children for scholastic success, preparing young people for productive careers, providing gainful employment for adults, caring for the elderly, supporting residents with special needs, empowering residents to manage their lives, aligning social service efforts, strengthening neighborhoods, upgrading public spaces, energizing the economic base and enjoying cultural and recreational opportunities.

Mayor Jim Bush said the poverty master plan will tie in naturally with the education master plan the community developed under his predecessor, Virginia DuPuy.

He said improving education and reducing poverty will be a long struggle.

"We're not looking for an instant fix," he said. "We need to start by getting the right people hired and the right people involved."

jbsmith@wacotrib.com

757-5752