

# In Spartanburg, doubling down on a years-long focus on equity

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## City and partners focus efforts to address intergenerational poverty, racial inequity



By his own estimate, Mitch Kennedy has climbed aboard a city bus with a different group of Spartanburg residents for a “community ride-around” no fewer than 30 times during the past two years.

Sometimes, these ride-arounds were for the benefit of a small number of people. Other times, every seat in the bus was filled. Every time, the purpose was the same: to share the challenges — many, if not all, rooted in decades of race-based inequities — facing Spartanburg and how the city and a growing constellation of partners were working to address them.

“These are people who are business leaders, education leaders, non-profit leaders, neighborhood leaders, as well as people who might not be in a leadership position right now but who want to make a difference and want to understand what is happening and where the challenges are,” said Kennedy.

“When you have people willing to get on a bus and ride around to places they haven’t spent much time in and see our challenges and be confronted with what that looks like — that’s big time. It impacts people and it eventually impacts how people and organizations make social service investments.”

There may be no person in Spartanburg better to serve as guide on such ride-arounds than Kennedy. Kennedy’s portfolio of responsibilities as assistant city manager is broad, encompassing community relations and efforts such as the Northside Initiative and the burgeoning revitalization effort in the Highland neighborhood. And Kennedy himself grew up in the Northside, giving him a unique perspective and credibility with longtime residents and newly engaged leaders alike.

But back to these bus tours. Kennedy says there comes a moment on every trip when he can see the proverbial light bulb come on for at least one person on the bus. A moment when someone makes the connection between public policy decisions and the systemic inequities that undergird generational poverty. From housing policy to crime and policing, from infrastructure to education to jobs, from access to child care and early childhood education to transportation and community health, people on these bus tours inevitably begin to think about challenges through the filter of equity and with a renewed sense of what it means to be a truly just community, equally providing opportunity for all.

These conversations have not only been happening on a bus. Hundreds of local citizens, encouraged by their employers, have been through the North Carolina-based Racial Equity Institute's training. No fewer than seven significant efforts with a focus on improving equity are underway. The United Way of the Piedmont's Financial Stability Initiative. The Spartanburg County Foundation's work on economic mobility. Collaboratives that have created and are building plans to address a Racial Equity Index and a Health Disparities Index, a pair of first-of-their-kind reports that lay out in stark terms systemic inequities across the community. The Spartanburg Academic Movement. The aforementioned Northside Initiative and Highland master planning process.

"The city and our partners have recognized and acknowledged publicly for years now that the biggest challenge facing us is intergenerational poverty," Kennedy said. "How do we help people and change these persistent outcomes is the question. To answer that, you must start with recognizing the past and understanding how this persistent poverty has happened. You have to understand that so that you can get the policy right today. Because the policies in the past are what got us here.

"Some people when they first climb on the bus are hesitant or resistant to the idea that racism is the top issue — but many of those same people will agree that poverty is. And you can't look at poverty without looking at race and systemic racism. Whenever you start looking at data, race is a factor. Racism has a major impact on poverty."

Making that connection is the light-bulb moment Kennedy has seen so often on the bus and in meetings, workshops and conversations across Spartanburg over the past few years.

*In the coming weeks, we will be highlighting in greater detail these efforts, initiatives, and groups in this space. First up will be a look at city police and the department leadership's view on community policing and the future.*