

EDITORIALS

# Charlotte needs to talk

## New task force aims to engage the whole community

**W**e Southerners aren't known for pointedly speaking our minds. The tradition here is to be polite, even at the expense of honesty. You make your point obliquely and hope others read between the lines.

This tradition has given us gentle manners and a courteous public demeanor. Both have helped Charlotte avoid the rancor of many other cities, something this city takes just pride in. But as a result, some unpleasant realities go unaddressed, because too few people want to say them aloud for fear of sounding, well, rude.

That means many people in Charlotte, as elsewhere, have never honestly talked about race relations, which continue to be strained. Too much goes unsaid, and ill will festers. Occasionally, when this undercurrent of emotion gushes into view like a geyser, the eruption may seem surprising or even alarming.

Some of this usually muted racial distrust has become more obvious in recent months. Charlotte-Mecklenburg police have shot two unarmed black people in separate incidents. At the same time, a group of "neighborhood schools" advocates is questioning Charlotte's 25-year commitment to school desegregation.

These are the kinds of community-wide issues that can only be resolved if people know how to speak forthrightly, yet respectfully, with one another.

Thursday, a group calling itself the Community Building Task Force introduced itself. Its impressive membership is diverse racially and geographically. The 40-some members include

high school students, neighborhood activists, ministers, executives, ex-school board members and a former governor. The political views range from those of Frank Barnes of the conservative Citizens for Effective Government to Minister Robert Muhammad of the Nation of Islam.



Ferguson

The group plans a series of "Listening Sessions" this summer and a community conference in the fall. The idea is to get people talking and make sure many voices are heard. Lawyer James Ferguson II, on the group's seven-member leadership team, says they aim for "difference with dignity." And, he predicted, "Part of the discourse is going to be uncomfortable."

That's OK. Charlotte is certainly strong enough to survive some discomfort in pursuit of strength. The problem of racial tension is simply too important to be pushed back underground, in hopes that we'll all revert to polite silence.

### WANT TO HELP?

To volunteer to help, call Dianne English, 347-2404, anytime. Donations may be made to Community Building Task Force, Foundation for the Carolinas, P.O. Box 34769, Charlotte, NC 28234-4769.