

Mankato leaders launch council to address areas diversity issues

By Ben Sandell, Free Press Staff Writer [published in The Free Press, Mankato]

MANKATO — City, education and business leaders announced Wednesday morning the creation of the Greater Mankato Area Diversity Council, a community organization that wants to enhance the quality of living in Greater Mankato by celebrating diversity.

Mankato Schools Supt. Ed Waltman, Mankato Mayor Jeff Kagermeier and Minnesota State University President Richard Davenport were among the speakers at Wednesday's event at the Intergovernmental Center.

"About two years ago, when I arrived on the scene, I said, 'Here is a city ripe for major civic engagement,'" said Davenport, who, along with Waltman, led the charge to create a diversity council in the area.

Waltman's decision to push for a diversity council was largely inspired by a similar program in Rochester, founded about 10 years ago.

The program in Rochester has been a great success, said George Thompson, executive director of the Rochester Diversity Council.

"It made our community proactive rather than reactive," he said, adding that Mankato should reap similar benefits. "It's a milestone day for Mankato."

The Mankato Diversity Council's 2004-2005 operating budget reserves \$3,000 for community celebration events and \$10,000 for middle school prejudice reduction workshops. First-year revenue, generated by local private and public organizations and community members, totals \$90,000.

The Mankato area's non-white population more than doubled in the last 10 years, Waltman said - diversity is playing a bigger and bigger role in the community.

"When I first came here (in 1978), diversity in Mankato meant a Lutheran dating a Catholic," said Tony Filipovitch, president of the Mankato Area Foundation, the fiscal agent for the council. "Our mission is to ensure quality of life in the community, and this (diversity) is a key element in that mission."

The council will be responsible for adult and K-12 public and non-public diversity education efforts, corporate training on diversity for area businesses, and community events relating to diversity. The council's community planning team is made up of more than 20 members.