

Realtors executive takes on segregation

By David Dagan

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Something is keeping people of different races apart in York County, but Steve Snell does not think that it is misbehaving Realtors.

Allegations have arisen during at least two public forums in recent years that Realtors are illegally "steering" minority homebuyers toward certain neighborhoods that have many black or Hispanic residents, said Snell, executive officer of the Realtors Association of York and Adams Counties Inc. (RAYAC).

"We categorically disagree with that," Snell said.

It's time to rebut the allegations and to figure out what is really going wrong by doing a full-blown study, Snell said. Rejecting the "steering" allegations is an official RAYAC position, but the call for a study is Snell's personal stance, he said.

"I think there are a lot of potential factors that conspire to keep this community more segregated than other communities and certainly more segregated than many of us would like," Snell said. "Let's look at the big picture. What are the causes?"

Meanwhile, Snell is defending the reputations of Realtors by working with the nonprofit York County Community Against Racism. He has asked the group to check whether any housing-related discrimination complaints filed with the state or York city officials involve Realtors. He also has invited representatives of the anti-racism group to sit in on mandatory training sessions for RAYAC members.

So far, data from the state's anti-discrimination agency shows a low number of housing-related complaints from York County, said Ryan Sattler, who leads the board of York County Community Against Racism.

Although the anti-racism group has no evidence of steering, it is unlikely that every single member of the Realtors association acts without prejudice, Sattler said. Other factors that contribute to segregation could include a shortage of affordable housing in some parts of the county, Sattler said. He praised Snell for his concern for the issue and agreed a comprehensive study may be needed.

"I don't think we can piecemeal it," Sattler said.

New Realtors are required to go through ethics training that covers discrimination issues, Snell said. RAYAC also requires members to take further ethics courses every two years. The topics of those courses rotate, but discrimination is part of the training going on now through the end of 2009, Snell said.

Snell and Sattler hardly have an adversarial relationship. Snell is helping Sattler with a separate project - persuading county officials to start a county-level anti-discrimination agency. Both men agreed the segregation picture in York County is improving.

Areas outside the city have grown more diverse since 1999, according to school-enrollment data analyzed by the Business Journal. The number of black students in York County public schools - other than city schools - went from about 1,200 to about 3,200 between the school years of 1999-2000 and 2006-2007. The Hispanic student population grew from less than 1,000 to more than 2,000. The population of blacks and Hispanics together grew from about 1.7 percent to about 4.4 percent of the total student population outside the city.

"You can see very clearly on the ground that we are becoming less segregated," said Eric Menzer, who leads Metro-York, a campaign to halt the deterioration of the county's urban area. He said segregation remains a major concern, though.

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Racial landscape changing

York County is becoming more diverse, according to school-enrollment figures.

This chart shows that the population of black and Hispanic students who attend school outside the city has risen sharply since the 1999-2000 school year. Black and Hispanic students remain in the majority at York city schools, together accounting for about 80 percent of students. —David Dagan

