

Making progress in the face of adversity

By Mayor James W. Knowles III

"Without a struggle, there can be no progress."

—**Frederick Douglas** 1817-1895, Abolitionist, Author, Activist



It's now been two years since the previous council, and I began the important process of making reforms within our city government, courts, and the police department. That process included town halls, community conversations, neighborhood meetings, staff meetings, visits from law enforcement experts, and a serious inward examination of our policies and procedures to determine what we were doing right, what was wrong, and what we should be doing better.

In March of 2015, the City of Ferguson approved an agreement for reform with the Department of Justice, more commonly referred to as a Consent Decree. In that agreement, the city and the Department of Justice laid out a number of reforms to the city government, courts, and police department that the city would implement over the next year. The document consists of a comprehensive list of reforms along with benchmarks and timelines to ensure progress is made and the reforms are successfully implemented.

Even before the approval of our Consent Decree with the Department of Justice, the City of Ferguson had proactively made tremendous efforts at reforms and has worked sincerely with stakeholders from around the community to rebuild trust in our city government. Citizen-led groups like the Civilian Review Board Task Force, Neighborhood Policing Steering Committee, and others have also contributed greatly to this effort, and their work is still ongoing.

While the work toward reform has been ongoing for sometime, last month was the first opportunity for the city to report on the progress the city and community have made before the federal judge overseeing the Consent Decree. As I sat in the courtroom and listened to the Justice Department, the Federal Monitor, the City, and the Judge report on the progress, the overall feeling in the room was very positive.

At the hearing, the City outlined a long list of reforms in the Consent Decree that had been completed as well as future deadlines for reforms that are still forthcoming. This outline, by the way, can be found on the city's website, www.fergusoncity.com. The judge praised the city's efforts so far, stating that the city had done "a huge amount of work," but also conceding that we still have a lot of work left to do.

By all objective measures, the city has made tremendous progress instituting significant reforms and has led the region, and really the state, in making much-needed changes to the way we do things. Many communities are still making those same mistakes that we all made several years ago, and very few have heeded the call to look at their practices and adopt meaningful reform. But you should all be proud that Ferguson is setting the standard for how things should be done in the future.

This reform effort has not been without adversity, and the progress we've made has not been without regular

setbacks. Instituting widespread reform while continuing the necessary services that people expect from their city government is difficult under any circumstances. The city has found itself trying to achieve this lofty goal while working with a tight budget and a skeleton crew. The city administration is running as lean as ever, with vacancies in major department head positions throughout this effort and. The Police Department has been short staffed and is working overtime to keep this community safe while making efforts to be more engaged in our community organizations and neighborhood groups.

What we've accomplished toward implementing the consent has been in the face of constant adversity, but the city has not let that stop us from making continual progress. The dedication from the city leadership and the city staff and the commitment to this task ensures we will continue to make progress, no matter what obstacles come in our way.