

CONAN SMITH

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August 11, 2016

Greg Dill
Interim County Administrator
Washtenaw County
220 North Main
Ann Arbor, MI 48107

Dear Administrator Dill:

There is a story from my mother's childhood that has shaped our family's engagement with communities across three generations. She was a twin. At two-years old, her sister, playing with matches, set her dress on fire. My grandparents called for an ambulance. When it arrived, the drivers saw not a badly burned little girl, but a black baby not worth saving. They turned around, and Lucille died.

For many this would have been a cause for bitterness. For my family it was a call to action -- and a call to public and social service. I was raised to believe that people working together can create a more just and more sustainable world. I was given incredible aspirational models in my grandparents who became leading civil rights advocates in Michigan and in their children who all went on to positions of public service as judges and senators. I was always reminded that the opportunities I have been provided gave me a privileged position to fight for change and to help those who haven't been so lucky.

In his waning years, my grandfather traveled the country giving speeches to high school students, striving to elevate their social consciousness and exhorting them to "be good to each other and have courage to right the wrongs." This mantra has led me to a professional career in the nonprofit world and as a public official -- jobs oriented toward supporting people and communities facing serious equity issues. I've actively sought out experiences and challenges that heighten both my skills as a leader and my sensitivity to the struggles that hard-hit communities face.

It would be a privilege to use these experiences to help Washtenaw County's Office of Community and Economic Development realize its greater potential as a leader in our community's fight for economic opportunity. Over nineteen years in the independent sector, I've garnered an array of administrative, financial and planning skills applicable to the scale of the department -- and I've never lost my enthusiasm for doing good in the world. I hope you will consider my vision for leadership and give me the opportunity to woo you as a candidate for the directorship of OCED.

Experienced Management in Service to Others

To me, an executive's job is not to excel at every function of the organization but rather to act as a conductor for an orchestra of professionals who look to their leader to bring out their best performances and make them harmonize. My approach as a leader is to become the most competent generalist in the organization and the absolute best at that conductor's role. This way, the talents of your professional staff and volunteer leaders are optimized – people feel *good* about their work, and they give you more for it.

In the philanthropic world, I've served in many of the roles I hope to support and guide as the department's leader. I've built affordable housing and designed wraparound services for residents. I've been a grunt-worker in nonprofits, a program director, the CEO, a board member and a board president. I've been a funder, managing grant portfolios like a program officer, and I serve on boards overseeing millions of dollars of grants each year. These real-life experiences help me understand the interests, stresses and dreams of both those providing the funding and those receiving the services.

As an executive, I pride myself on building strong, passionate teams whose members care about each other and the work they are doing. Whether it's a tight-knit group of six growing a fledgling nonprofit or an experienced team of 20 delivering complex programs, I know how to help them experience the daily grind as more than just a job. This is reflected in the accolades our organization has received, but it is best expressed by the continued passion our alumni show for the organization and its work.

Strategic Leadership to Achieve Big Goals

One of the most exciting aspects of OCED's work is its role as a strategic leader in creating economic opportunity in Washtenaw County. Creating lasting community change depends on leadership that can inspire others to commit to the long-term vision and strategies necessary for the community to recover. With strong social assets in education and philanthropy, the county is decently-positioned, but its challenges are extraordinary especially on the east side. No one entity can resolve them. But, an energized set of partners can significantly improve the quality of life for our residents and set the course for a return to prosperity.

Pulling together these kinds of forces has been a hallmark of my tenure at Washtenaw County and at Metro Matters. For example, in the energy field, I've helped communities, utilities and contractors come together to improve the market for energy efficiency and renewable energy projects. Together we raised and spent more than \$10M making our neighborhoods safer through public lighting, allowing municipalities to spend more on direct services and less on powering their buildings, and making homes more comfortable and sustainable. Better yet, we leveraged another \$30M for that work from the private sector. These collaborations give everyone involved in them – from residents to corporate magnates – a sense of meaningful engagement in improving their communities, building good-will and helping the people who need it most.

Similar work can be (and in many cases is being) done in Washtenaw's most hard hit communities, leveraging government investments to create wider community change. For example, we know that the weakness of the school system in the Ypsilanti area has systemic impact on the east side's ability to grow and prosper. Our community has already started down the path of providing pre-K to college opportunities for Ypsi residents, and we're looking intentionally at how our community development investments can foster greater economic equality. What I can offer to this already-strong foundation is a keen capacity for seeing large systems and how they can function more efficiently and effectively for social good. I also bring formal

training (and no small bit of learning from the school of hard knocks) as a mediator and facilitator. I know how to help would-be partners to explore and understand their differences and find the places where their goals and interests align.

An Extensive Network of Local and Regional Players

I've lived my whole life in Washtenaw County and spent my career working with public officials in this region and at the state and national levels. One fresh asset I can bring to OCED is a broad network of influential people from every sector of our community that the department engages with.

As an elected official, I've worked intimately with my peers at every level of service across the County. For example, I leveraged my relationship with Ypsilanti Township officials to successfully negotiate the settlement of our police services lawsuit. As Manchester Village suffered an economic downturn, my relationship with Pat Vaillencourt helped open the door to an investment in business attraction for their downtown. Obviously, my relationships with our state legislative delegation are exceptionally strong.

Our community is fortunate to have experts in every field at our disposal thanks to the presence of excellent higher education institutions, and I have ensured that they are engaged in informing, supporting and leading the County's policy priorities. For example, I recruited Dr. Elisabeth Gerber, professor at U-M's Ford School of Public Policy and one of the nation's leading researchers on regionalism, to serve as one of our appointees to the Regional Transit Authority. When the County was grappling with our relationship with the Convention and Visitors Bureaus, I engaged Dr. Russ Merz, a professor of Marketing at EMU's business school, to help explain how our investments are best leveraged.

As a nonprofit executive, the leaders of many of the organizations OCED partners with are my peers and long-time friends. Whether its housing advocates at Avalon, business leaders at SPARK, or the support network at SOS Community Services, I trust we share a passion for positive change in our community, and I have built trusting relationships that can be leveraged to help the department achieve its goals.

The opportunity to lead an institution so uniquely positioned to do so much good in a community so intensely challenged is rare and special. Helping the Office of Community and Economic Development to leverage its substantial social and financial resources and strengthen its capacity to make real and lasting change for Washtenaw County residents is a role my entire career has been leading up to. Managing a robust staff, developing large and complicated budgets, overseeing a major investment portfolio, designing and implementing grant programs and working with diverse board and community leadership structures have all prepared me to help the department to succeed in achieving its mission of strengthening Washtenaw County.

I would be humbled to serve you and excited to take on the challenge of deepening OCED's impact on our community. I hope we get the chance to explore this opportunity together.

Sincerely,

Conan Smith

