

Pirates' Coonley pushes for greater urban focus for baseball

[Sep 28, 2015](#)

By Christian Morrow



Pirates President Frank Coonley (photo by J.L. Martello)

Pittsburgh Pirates President Frank Coonley told the audience at the most recent African American Chamber of Commerce PowerBreakfast meeting that despite considerable outreach efforts by the Pirates and other major league teams, talented Black athletes are opting to play other sports, primarily because of the expense—and baseball is suffering.

Excluding Black players from the Caribbean, Central America and South America, African American participation in major league baseball peaked in 1986 at 19 percent. Today, it stands at 8 percent.

“This is critical to our future. Something is going on that’s bad for baseball,” he said. “We’ve seen participation declines across the board but more significantly by African Americans. We must make sure we break down barriers.”

Those barriers are primarily economic, he said, noting that while urban kids get a \$20 ball, find a hoop at a playground or gym and begin learning basketball, the newest baseball bats for elite-level amateur players can cost \$350. And that’s just part of it, there’s also travel.

“We’re not talking about going from the North Side to Beaver County, We’re talking about Boston, Chicago, and the Carolinas. And the parents have to pick up those expenses; planes, hotels,” he said. “It not only limits opportunity, but it’s bad for baseball because it reduces our talent pool. I want to choose from the best athletes, not just from the kids that can afford it.”

Lacking an overall national baseball association—like USA Hockey, Coonley said, there is not a lot major league baseball can do about that. But there are other barriers, at the little league and high school level, baseball can address—like access to adequate facilities. And the Pirates are doing so.

“We need to get more fields built and maintained,” he said. “We currently have a program that provides up to \$5,000 in matching funds for any renovations. We’ve given away \$30,000 so far.”

The team is also engaged in outreach to city kids to get them interested in baseball, through school visits and through ticket giveaways to schools, churches, nonprofits and civic groups. A lot of that activity Coonley credited to the team’s Director of Diversity Initiatives Chaz Kellem, who, he added, sadly has chosen to leave the team for a post at the YWCA of greater Pittsburgh.

“He’s been offered a position there and has decided to take it,” said Coonley. “It’s a loss for us, especially since he’d just taken over a new initiative on youth participation in baseball. But he’s a great guy and it’s a great opportunity for him.”



CHAZ KELLEM

“And as for procurement, I know Chaz was the point guy for a lot of you, so let me give you the name of the new guy—Frank Coonley.”

In closing, chamber President and CEO Doris Carson Williams said the chamber would be more than happy to help in the search for Kellem’s replacement, and would publicize anything the Pirates required.

She also welcomed new members including Ronell Guy, executive director of the Northside Coalition for Fair Housing, and Kathi Elliott, DNP, who is taking over the reigns of Gwen’s Girls, the organization founded by her mother police Cmdr. Gwen Elliott.

She also announced a members’ mixer at the Children’s Museum, for Sept. 29 and a business workshop on cybersecurity at the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild, Oct. 7.

Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership President and CEO Jeremy Waldrup is scheduled to speak at the Oct. 14 PowerBreakfast, and new Allegheny County Airport Authority CEO Christina Cassotis, will speak at a special breakfast meeting Nov. 20.

The chamber’s annual business luncheon is scheduled for Dec. 3 at the Omni William Penn. The keynote speaker will be Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf.