Theory Test

Leadership professor Thad Williamson takes the helm of the city's new anti-poverty office — and sees if his ideals survive reality.

BY **TINA GRIEGO @TINAGRIEGO**

At a news conference last week, Mayor Dwight Jones names University of Richmond leadership professor Thad Williamson to head a new city office that's dedicated to fighting the city's entrenched poverty.

The announcement that University of Richmond professor Thad Williamson will head the mayor's new Office of Community Wealth Building came as a surprise. But only in its timing.

The job starts June 1, but City Council has yet to approve next fiscal year's budget, which would create the office and starts July 1. Confident of council's support, the mayor plans to bridge costs of the one-month gap using untapped administrative staffing money.

As for the choice of Williamson, it's a no-brainer for anyone paying attention to the city's ongoing anti-poverty initiative. The 44-year-old associate professor of leadership studies at UR was the lead author of the Mayor's 2012 Anti-Poverty Commission report. He's been serving as co-chairman of the Maggie Walker Initiative for Expanding Opportunity and Fighting Poverty, which grew out of that report.

Should all go as the mayor envisions, Williamson, who will take at least a year's leave from UR, will oversee a $2.4 million first-year budget. That covers $300,000 for the new office (including his $96,000 salary) and

money for, among other things, continued work-force development, wraparound services for the families of those in job training and ongoing support of after-school programs for middle-school students.

Style: *I think the first response I saw on Twitter to your hire was that you would be heading the Office of Community Wha-a-a? Why not just anti-poverty office?*

Williamson: I think there has been a concern that the term anti-poverty could be heard as being anti-poor people when our intent is precisely the opposite. ⋯ Community wealth building is another way to put poverty reduction, but it implies a sense of empowerment and economic and, frankly, racial justice that speaks the city's history. If we have healthy neighborhoods with access to employment, to transportation, to high quality education, to support services and recreational facilities — if we have those things, then the poverty problem largely takes care of itself.

We already have an office of Social Services, a Center for Workforce Innovation — why do we need a new office to fight poverty?

Because the whole poverty reduction strategy is not just about services and service delivery ⋯ and it's not just about employment. ⋯ To make this work a whole cluster of long-term policy changes needs to take place. ⋯ It's very clear that if no one in city government is thinking about this all the time — and seeing how the pieces connect and pushing what needs to be pushed and making sure that allocated money is used for its intended purposes and seizing opportunities along the way — then it just won't happen.

You made your budget presentation to City Council, and a day later the mayor names you to the job. Why now as opposed to after the budget has been approved?

Once the decision was made and it was worked out [with UR] that I could take a year's leave, then letting council know was more transparent. Now there's a person who is known attached to this. It's not just, "Give us an office and we'll tell you later who the people are." The more practical thing is when we've been talking to community partners, the No. 1 question has been, "Who's going to lead this and who is going to run this?" Our goal is to hit the ground running on July 1.

You're a tenured professor at UR and well known in your field. You're leaving that for a year, possibly two, for this unknown. Pros and cons?

It wasn't exactly an overnight decision. At this point, it would have been difficult to carry the process forward in the intended way, in a timely way by bringing in someone completely new, even a very brilliant person. Another piece is if Richmond is ever going to change, people are going to have to take risks. If someone like me who does have a secure, very privileged position isn't willing to make what, in the big scheme of things, is a very modest sacrifice, why are we expecting other people, affluent or not, to take risks that could lead to significant improvement? From an academic point of view and someone who studies public policy, this is really pretty cool to try to test ideas you had a hand in developing as opposed to just theorizing about them. I love theorizing but at some point, I'd like to see things get done, too. ⋯ And finally, Richmond really is the narrative of the United States, and if we can change this place, that could have a huge ripple effect on the entire state and the entire South.

What do you mean by Richmond "is the narrative of the United States"?

The side-by-side contradiction between a language and commitment to freedom and democracy and self-rule with a system of brutal oppression that has taken on many different forms over time. I interpret a lot of the city's problems as the consequence of the compromises of the civil rights movement and the white-led resistance back in the '60s. Schools, housing, the transportation system, the lack of annexation powers — all those things basically set up a city that has been designed to fail.

But there are things happening in society that are benefiting cities, including Richmond — young people interested in urban living, things like the river and greener ways of life — that present a pretty big opportunity. If we take that momentum, along with a commitment to social justice and respect for the people who have been here a long time, we can really make some big improvements in the structure of opportunity and a healthier civic culture. ⋯

The goal is not just to do a couple of projects and say we did something, but to institutionalize this poverty reduction effort so that this office and its work will be seen as assets by the next mayor and the next City Council. Poverty reduction and expanding opportunity are the biggest challenges in the city. I can't imagine anyone getting elected in a citywide race who doesn't understand that.