

Commissioners outline Governor Dayton's budget priorities

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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For years, residents of North Minneapolis have felt slighted by state leaders, but Gov. Mark Dayton and his administration have been making efforts to reach out to citizens on the north side.

As a part of the efforts to reach out, the state's commissioner on human rights and deputy commissioner of the Department of Revenue hosted a town hall meeting at the Minneapolis Urban League, 2100 Plymouth Ave. N., to inform area residents about happenings with the state budget and various human rights initiatives. The nearly two-hour town hall outlined the governor's vision for spending in critical areas such as education and job creation and efforts to reduce racial gaps in education and hiring.

"There's a widening gulf between the haves and have nots, and Minneapolis has the greatest gap in hiring throughout the nation, said Human Rights Commissioner Kevin Lindsey. "Even when you have Blacks and Latinos who are similarly educated (to whites) they are still not employed at the same rate as whites."

Lindsey said his department and other state agencies are working to address the root causes of the educational, employment and economic disparities within the state. Lindsey said the consequences are dire if the problems are not addressed.

For example, "In some states, not Minnesota, but some states, if there is a large number of kids in 3rd grade not performing at grade level, that determines the number of new jails to be built," said Lindsay. "It's important for a society to make sure its youngest citizens are performing well."

Deputy commissioner of the state's Department of Revenue Matt Masserman said the governor's proposed budget aims to strengthen education for all the state's children. According to Masserman, Dayton is proposing \$344 million in education funding, with \$44 million allocated to early childhood education and another \$40 million to fund full all-day kindergarten.

"The cost of education has been skyrocketing as we continue to under-fund education," said Masserman.

In addition to addressing the disparities in education, Lindsey and Masserman discussed ways

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the state can do better in promoting minority hiring – in particular, in the area of construction.

“The Vikings Stadium project is a \$1 billion project, but keep in mind every year MnDOT spends \$1 billion in construction projects,” said Lindsey. “Right now, 10 out of every 11 construction workers are white, non-Hispanic and that population is aging and will be in retirement soon, so there are opportunities to be had here.”

Lindsey said his department is also supporting proposed “Ban the Box” legislation that would no longer allow potential employers from asking applicants about arrest histories until a decision on hiring is being made. According to the human rights commissioner, many – disproportionately African-, Native- and Hispanic-Americans – are being frozen out of employment opportunities because of an arrest history; even if that arrest did not involve a conviction or even charges being filed.

Citing a 2011 study, Lindsey said in 2010, Minneapolis, along with Detroit, Milwaukee and Las Vegas had African-American unemployment rates of 20 percent or higher, which is comparable to the rates during the Great Depression. The same study noted that African-Americans in Minneapolis were 3.6 times as likely to be unemployed than whites.

“If we can all grow and prosper together this is better than keeping one segment of the population in the ditch,” said Lindsey.