

Candidate forum for Minneapolis mayor focuses on African-American community needs

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
Monday, 15 April 2013 15:31

Candidates interested in becoming Minneapolis' next mayor gathered this past Sunday (April 7) to discuss their visions for the city; in particular their visions for the city's African-American community.



The forum, held at New Salem Missionary Baptist Church, 2507 Bryant Ave. N., and presented by *Insight News*, His Works United and the Minnesota State Baptist Convention, gave members of the community a first-hand look and listen to six candidates vying to become the city's next mayor. Candidates who participated included former state DFL chair, Mark Andrew; former city council president, Jackie Cherryhomes; City Councilwoman Betsy Hodges; City Councilman

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Don Samuels; City Councilman Gary Schiff and businessman and attorney, Cam Winton. The event was moderated by *Insight News* founder and editor-in-chief, Al McFarlane with opening remarks by the Rev. Jerry McAfee, pastor of New Salem, and closing remarks by the Rev. Brian Heron, pastor of Zion Baptist Church.

"I'm of the opinion that over the past eight years or so it's been dire straights for the African-American; especially in north Minneapolis," said McAfee. "We are behind economically, educationally – all the way down the line. But the group that votes 95 or more percent down the line with the DFL is the African-American; we're not given very much attention."

McAfee suggested that other groups with equal or less political clout are being favored by many politicians as the needs of African-Americans in the state go largely ignored.

"If you can put all that money into same sex marriage then you can put that same money into employing African-Americans," said McAfee.

Some very pointed questions were asked of the candidates concerning their commitments towards the African-American community.

Winton, an attorney and businessman whose business employs 120 people said he evaluates people as individuals and not based on race.

"What I sought to do was go colorblind," said Winton, who when pressed to come up with the number of African-Americans employed by his company could not do so. He said that much of his operations are in rural areas of Minnesota, Iowa and South Dakota, and conceded the number is probably low.

Hodges said one of her primary reasons for running for mayor is to unify Minneapolis. She said in her seven years on the city council she has been a tireless advocate for the city's civil rights authority. She said most recently, she has worked to insure minority owned businesses were being evaluated fairly when competing for bids on city involved projects such as the new Vikings stadium project.

Samuels, who was born in Jamaica and is the lone African-American running, said his entire life's service has been to benefit the African-American community. He said he chose his residence in the heavily African-American Jordan neighborhood in particular to be of service to African-Americans.

Samuels is known to host vigils in his neighborhood for homicide victims. As a councilman, Samuels said he sponsored a bill known as Ban the Box – a bill that would prohibit employers from using a person's criminal history as a determining factor in hiring.

"We can't waste our young people's lives," said Samuels. "We must educate them well and if they fail and fall aside, we must restore them."

Andrew said he has been committed to the needs of African-Americans since his youth.

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"My friend and I biked across the city to Plymouth Avenue in the aftermath of the riots against police violence in 1965," said Andrew. "I didn't know what it all meant, I just knew it was wrong. And I knew it was reprehensible."

Andrew said he was also instrumental in recruiting former mayor Sharon Sayles Belton to run for the position. Belton was elected as the city's first – and only – African-American mayor. Belton, however, is supporting Cherryhomes.

Cherryhomes, a resident of north Minneapolis, said she doesn't just live in the community, but is part of the community.

"I led by example by hiring African-Americans every opportunity I got and then nurturing them so they could go on and do other more important things," said Cherryhomes, speaking of her time as a city council member.

Cherryhomes said even after her time in office she continued her service to the African-American community, working with Summit Academy and the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center.

"You have to be engaged (with the African-American community) in many ways. You have to engage with the church community, with the service community, with the nonprofit community," said Cherryhomes. "Your engagement has to be intentional, it has to be genuine and it has to deliver results."

Schiff said he has worked for and with many African-American organizations including the Minneapolis Urban League and OutFront Minnesota where he worked to close loopholes in many of the city's civil rights laws. He said his work helped to close the loophole that did not allow for citizens to bring forth complaints against the city's police department.

"My history has been as a community organizer," said Schiff. "That's the work I'm most proud of."

Schiff said as mayor he would push for what he called zip code hiring, which would ensure that companies awarded government contracts hire from within the zip code where the work is being performed.

Hodges said if elected, she would make sure that jobs go where jobs are needed most.

"Contract inclusion, contract enforcement and contract compliance are crucial to the needs of the entire city," said Hodges.

Hodges said she is vigilant in making sure transportation options are available to all communities.

"We need to make sure that transit and transportation are going to the communities that need it most," said Hodges. "Those not only allow people to get to jobs, but most importantly, they bring

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jobs to people.

The nearly two-hour forum covered a wide array of topics including crime, education, and even computer literacy. Herron said they have plans for more candidate forums.

The first installment of the forum broadcast aired on KFAI's "Conversations with Al McFarlane" last Tuesday, with the second part airing this Tuesday at 9am. The television broadcasts are 7pm Monday and Tuesday nights on SPNN Channel 19 in St. Paul, and 11pm Thursdays on MTN Channel 16 in Minneapolis. Check station program guides on line to see additional rebroadcasts.

The Minneapolis mayoral election is on Nov. 5.