Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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National NAACP President Ben Jealous was in town this past week to show his support for forces united to defeat two proposed amendments on the Nov. 6 state ballot.

Jealous came to town to campaign against the proposed voter ID amendment and the proposed amendment against gay marriage. Both were placed on the ballot by a majority Republican state legislature. And while the issues are not connected on the ballot, Jealous and others believe they should be connected when voters go to the polls.

"After a century of using the state Constitution to expand rights we're beginning to see it used to restrict rights," said Jealous, who spoke in a televised forum with several area political and community leaders. "Once you go down that road, our community and people of color will be hurt again and again."

The civil rights leader likened the proposed Minnesota amendments to policies of Mississippi – a state widely considered behind the times on issues of equality.

"Minnesota has a choice," said Jealous. "It can become more like Mississippi, but with snow, or it can go the other direction."

Nationally, the NAACP came out in support of gay marriage – a move that sent some minor shockwaves through the African American community. But Jealous said the nation's oldest civil rights organization sees gay marriage as a civil rights issue. He said the issue of gay marriage is being used to divide the African American community. He further added it is not by chance that voter ID initiatives and marriage equality questions appear on the ballot simultaneously.

"With this issue (of marriage equality), the ultimate goal is to drive a wedge within the Black community," said Jealous. "In 2004 the far right wing saw a window of opportunity when (Pres.) George W. Bush got the highest percentage of Black votes when Bush pushed against marriage equality."

Dr. Josie Johnson, a life-long crusader for human rights who was also on the panel, said she is shocked that some would seek to turn back the clock on voting rights. Johnson, who said she walked with her father in 1945 on the elimination of the poll tax law in Texas, sees the proposed voter ID amendment as a modern-day poll tax.

"As an old woman, to know that we are fighting this same fight (as fought in the Civil Rights Movement) is troubling to me," said Johnson. "I never thought I'd live to see a Black man

elected president. I also never thought I'd live long enough to see a segment of society that would rather see this county go down rather than work with our president."

Johnson noted that the many restrictive voting measures being proposed or implemented throughout the nation did not occur until after the election of the country's first African American president.

Kevin Lindsey, Commissioner of Human Rights for Minnesota, said requiring Minnesota voters to show a government-issued state photo identification card would cause some 200,000 Minnesotans to be denied the right to vote.

"When you take a look at the voter ID initiative, it's going to hurt our elderly, individuals with disabilities, members of our military," said Lindsey. "About 10 percent of Minnesotans will be impacted because they do not have a photo ID. If we do not vote no, if we do not say this is wrong, then we are saying we do not care about democracy."

Lindsey said because of cost, there are currently nine counties in the state that would have to change their methods of casting ballots because they do not even have polling places and require voters to mail in their votes. "The cost of this unfunded mandate could reach $100 million statewide."

Democratic State Sen. Jeff Hayden said while many Republicans were elected on the promise of getting the state's fiscal house in order, that has not been the case.

"We spent most of our time on these (voter ID and marriage equality) issues," said Hayden.

Jealous said the issues of voter suppression and banning gay marriage are not indicative of the Republican Party as a whole.

"Let's be clear, these people seeking to suppress the vote and deny the rights of those wanting to marry the person of his or her choice are not Democrats or Republicans. They are the far right wing," said Jealous. The civil rights leader pointed to Republican governors of Michigan and Virginia who vowed to veto any such bills limiting rights if put before them.

The forum was a part of the long-running series, "Conversations with Al McFarlane."