

# Loretta Smith

*Multnomah County's District 2 commissioner is taking stock of the needs of her constituents, beginning with a groundbreaking forum for African-Americans*

BY JOANNE ZUHL  
STAFF WRITER

Given that Loretta Smith is only the second African-American elected to the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners, it's not surprising that one of her first major events was the press the question, why? What was needed in her North and Northeast district — and across Multnomah County — to help people succeed, to get involved in government and to create a more positive record?

The forum was a resounding success, with hundreds in attendance and similar events planned for the future for all communities of color. Now, Smith has taken on board the tall order of meeting those needs, not the least of which are jobs, housing and opportunity. Not the easiest of tasks when budgets on all fronts are leaving little room for trying anything new.

**Joanne Zuhl:** Tell me about the African-American forum you held recently.

**Loretta Smith:** They've historically not been asked, hence the big engagement. What we tried to do was see what they needed to succeed. I thought it went over well. It was well attended. There were well over 200 plus people, standing room only. It was very surprising so many people attended.

**J.Z.:** What were the ages?

**L.S.:** From 12 to 77. We originally did a call for 12 to 25. More than half of them were, but I think when other people found out that this was going to be a meeting to discuss African-American males, they didn't care how old they were, they just wanted to be part of the conversation. So word just spread. They showed up and they were lined up outside the door.

**J.Z.:** What does that tell you?

**L.S.:** That tells me that they were very excited and hungry to give their views about what's going on with them personally, and that they've not been asked before and that this was an opportunity to get their voice heard. It also tells me that I need to make sure that I follow up and do what I said I was going to do. And I'm working on that right now.

**J.Z.:** What were they telling you?

**L.S.:** It was clear that they want jobs, summer jobs for youths, opportunities for education; housing is definitely an issue. There were some issues about violence in the community, and gangs were talked about, but that was not the focus of the meeting. This was more about, if you come in contact with county services what can we do better to improve upon it? I wanted their suggestion to make sure we were making people feel included, that we were offering the kind of services that they needed to succeed. So I heard them loud and clear that jobs, jobs, jobs was an issue.

**J.Z.:** So do you think the county, and local government, is offering them the kind of services that they need to succeed?

**L.S.:** I think that we're offering the safety net services and the public safety services that we are charged to do here at Multnomah County. I would like the group to help me put departments like Community Justice out of business because they're the ones who supervise parole and probation, and a large number of folks who are supervised by Multnomah County, over 23 percent, are African American, when they only make up 6 percent of the county. That's alarming to me.

They have the same concerns as the public at large has, but they've never been invited to have a conversation. I think the civic engagement piece with communities of color outreach has been there, but I don't think they have been as aggressive as we have been to get them in here. This is not just my one-time meeting with communities of color. I think it was very clear that there are different communities in addition to African Americans and Latinos and Native Americans (who have high foster care rates as well). And I think you'll be seeing a lot from us, having very targeted conversations with constituencies around the city, from seniors to mental health advocates to small business people.

**J.Z.:** You mentioned about the streets being hot right now. Is that a byproduct of the job situation?

**L.S.:** I think it's a byproduct of a couple of



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things. We have literacy issues and we have poverty issues. And in many cases our young people across the board, if they don't have money, they're going to do what they feel like they need to do. They clearly said, if we don't have money, this is what we'll do to get it.

**J.Z.:** And we now know about the loss of African-Americans in the city's core.

**L.S.:** African Americans have moved out to the numbers. I lost 10,000-12,000 people in District 2 to East County. They gained about 12,000 votes. So under a new redistricting proposal, I am going to propose increasing my district, instead of stopping at 122, the proposed plan calls for me to move out to 148. I have to pickup 10,000 or so new people. Looking at the Census data, it's because of economics, and a lot of the poverty is stretching out to East County, so it's going out toward the numbers and that's where people can afford to live.

**J.Z.:** What then do we do about that? How do we become the community where anyone can thrive?

**L.S.:** Well, we are a safety net government and we need to make sure we provide services that extend out toward East County. I think we've done a pretty good job in making sure that we have services with the new health clinic, the new building of the East County Courthouse. I think we're doing our part to make sure critical services are out in East County and we're able to accept that capacity.

**J.Z.:** You talk to the services the county offers. But it is at the mercy of other forces and politics. What are your thoughts about the

performances of the governments outside of the county?

**L.S.:** We're kind of in a holding pattern based on what the governor's going to do and what the federal government is going to do. They've had a lot of ups and down as far as how the new Congress has been regulating dollars that come to the state, everything from Medicare reimbursements to the block grant dollars. Those are things we don't have any control over so we have to be in a holding pattern, we have to be patient, and we still have to serve the constituency with the county services.

One of the good news pieces of this is that a lot of our health department dollars that come from the state and federal government are entitlement programs. So we may fair well in those departments. But programs like the LIHEAP (Low-Income Home Emergency Assistance Program) that serves 20,000 seniors, is expected to be cut 50 percent. The WIC program is expected to be cut. A lot of the mental health services, they may be cut as well. It all lands on our lap. Multnomah County is the largest provider of mental health services in the state. And we are anxiously waiting to see what the governor is going to do.

**J.Z.:** Along those lines are the city's urban renewal areas, URAs, which pull money from the county's future tax base with tax increment financing, or TIF, for development. How do you feel about the relationship on URA funding between the county and the city?

**L.S.:** We don't have a direct role in how that is crafted, but we are impacted by the lack of dollars that are coming in for our school districts and to the county. My goal

## CORRECTION

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