

# EDITORIAL

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## The Portland Observer

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## City's Contract Program Designed To Fail

### JAMES POSEY OWNS WORKHORSE CONSTRUCTION OF PORTLAND

A regional study of public contracting discrimination and the city of Portland's resulting Fair Contracting and Employment Strategy began as a courageous process that held so much promise and hope for minority contractors, but now the city has blown it.

As much as I tried to avoid this conclusion, the city's attempt to drive a stake into the heart of the problem of public contracting discrimination has missed the mark.

This is sad because I'm convinced some folks at the city really do want to do the right thing. Now I'm faced with the dilemma of criticizing the one government body that has honestly tried more than any other to seriously tackle the problem.

But someone must continue to say that most black contractors would do just fine, given equal access and simple fairness. Government action beyond this is often more harmful than helpful.

Those of us who have been down this road before recognized distinct and troubling patterns: The hiring of key personnel whose skills and experience have little relationship to the technical duties expected to be performed in civil rights-related issues; allowing staff and departments responsible for past failures to continue to formulate and control the new initiatives; loading the development advisory committees with known opponents of minority contractor programs; ensuring that the hassle of the process and price of involvement outweighs the tangible benefits; shifting most of the resources from the central cause of the problem to symptomatic ailments; and building a bureaucracy that is self-justifying, self-serving and self-perpetuating.

In spite of the City Council's good intentions, it continues to err by attempting to sidestep the issue of race in terms of proposing solutions. Groups that have been historically denied economic access because of race will not be well-served by the broad application of all the groups included in the strategy.

The city has unsuccessfully tried the race-neutral theme prescribed by the U.S. Supreme Court's 1989 and 1995 decisions that struck down minority contracting set-aside. On the other hand, it ignores the Supreme Court's strict-scrutiny theme to narrowly focus programs where racial disparity is found.

The city's program is broad and unfocused. It is determined to cover everybody.

Other structural flaws in the city's strategy occur because it is unwilling to address the realities of how racism has hurt the competitive capacity of minority contractors in the past. For example, the program tries to force participants into a competitive market process without considering the limited capacity of many minority firms having to make a profit under the current low-bid system.

Closely related to the issue is the fact that the same public contracting prevailing wage factor works to exclude many minority workers, further diluting the minority contractor's ability to employ highly skilled, profit-producing workers from minority communities. No matter how many times these critical issues are presented, the city chooses to look the other way.

What's devastating is how these factors work effectively to discourage future generations of black contractors from seriously considering this business.

## Eye With A View

I Dream A Time...Will You Dream With Me??!!

I dream a time when our children will not die in the streets like dogs...and we will return them to their families, their communities, to their world-safe and of sound mind--will you dream with me?!

Last summer as this writer moved south along Martin Luther King Boulevard in Northeast Portland, the traffic all of a sudden began to pile up as we approached the cross street of Northeast Broadway. As the traffic slowed to a crawl, off to my left flank, it became painfully clear why the traffic jam had occurred. It was due to a Tri-Met bus that had stopped abruptly in the street.

However, by the time I reached the scene, it was surrounded by familiar yellow tape that signaled the presence of danger or an area quarantine for the purpose of investigating a homicide. I quickly learned that on the bus a young black man lie dead on the floor from a gun shot wound to the head. Two weeks before, on a back street in Northeast Portland, two other young black men were killed as they sat in their car. And while we commend the collective efforts of our city's social services machines (i.e. police, fire, community programs, medical teams, etc.), this summer the front pages of the Observer, Oregonian and Skanner have informed us of similar reports.

The occurrence has become so familiar that we hold our breath, wondering when the next mother's child will fall prey to still one more fatal bullet--yet praying for some relief or miracle that the death angel will com-

pletely pass by. Now as most of our children return to school and the Oregon rains remind us that fall is here and winter is nearby, just maybe, (we say as we breathe a sigh of hopeful relief) the killing will stop--at least until next summer!

But the question that I ask is why do we allow it to occur? We live in the wealthiest country in the world; we have the highest GNP of any other country; we have put many a man on the moon; we can send a laser beam to Jupiter, and spell America on its surface; but we can't stop our children from killing each other?

Personally, I cannot accept the thesis that we can't stop these killings, what I do accept is that we do not--and the reason we do not is because we lack resolve! thus, we lack vision, commitment, consistent effort, monetary and human resources to stop it. We would rather throw a few dollars here and there for suppression and guilt alleviation, but we knowingly and consistently fall short of doing what it takes. When will we get serious about this task? When will we be willing to roll up our sleeves and invest the time, energy, effort, brain-thrust, prayer, and money that it's going to take to get the job done.

I was most pleased to see the article that appeared in the Observer entitled Violence Outdoes Resolve. I was even more pleased that it was

written by the Editor of the Observer. Such concern voiced by persons of that caliber and with the means to get the message out, is the kind of modeling we need from our leaders. When was the last time there was a summit to discuss this issue in earnest? When was the last time we felt that efforts were being put into real solutions and not merely the appearance of things looking better.

Though I am only one voice, but just in case no one else has, I will officially be the first person to stand up and take on the Observer's Editorial Challenge, and declare that I have the resolve. And my resolve is stronger than the violence that seems to engulf our children; it is stronger than their willingness to die--which is really fear hidden behind a facade of indifference; further, it is stronger than the statistics that say they will not live past twenty one. And stronger still than those who have grown comfortable with a certain number of average deaths, as long as the number does not exceed it. I resolve that no child has to die in gang violence in Portland; that no mother, whether rich or poor has to look forward to getting that call in the early a.m. that her child is dead.

If there are others who feel the same as Mr. Washington of the Observer, myself, then let voice be heard. Write the Portland Observer, and tell them that you are person number

three, four, five--nth...and say that you have the resolve! And you are committed to doing something about it!

As for my part, I resolve to write about this person's life. All that he/she was, wanted to be, and could have been. I will refuse to let them be mere statistics, but real human beings who had dreams and ambitions just like you and I. In a word, I will refuse to let them die quietly, as dogs in the street, in humane, and summarily disregarded as mere garbage.

I will also continue the work that God has call me to in this community regardless of naysayers and detractors. And we will establish a mental stress and psychological trauma treatment clinic that specializes in helping these young people cope with the pain and disappointment of living in a violent culture. I will by faiths and sacrificial effort began today to count down to the day when no mother's child will die in gang violence in Portland! That is my prayer, that is my faith, that is my hope, that is my resolve!

Sam Pierce is a freelance writer, his column Eye With A View, appears in the Observer periodically. He can be reached by phone at (503) 282-4979.

## perspectives

### Opportunity Knocks: Are The Knuckles Raw?



BY PROF. MCKINLEY BURT

This column closed last week with the caustic comment of a black teenager that a million African Americans on a 'March' [or anywhere else] could have acted in the manner of black people of yesteryear and realized that just small individual assessments would provide the means for large scale economic projects.

Actually, he had paid rapt attention to a family discussion several weeks ago when they were voicing pros and cons in respect to the article in which I cited the complex and sophisticated management positions occupied by African Americans--these in the establishment infrastructure, of course; nothing owned by black people.

It seems that a grandfather made a

rather snide comment that it was simply amazing that these black geniuses could display as their renowned African ancestors. That is, exhibit the same organizational, technical and scholastic talent as those who built the pyramids and subtending infrastructure or the African Universities like Timbuktu where Europeans came to study in the middle ages -- but today must depend upon Asian immigrants to operate their corner groceries.

This man had been a student in my "Small Business Operations" class at Portland State University during the 1970's and he understood full well the implications of this situation. He said, "it may mean that we [African Americans] may not have sufficient social (spiritual?) resources to recover from that last destructive assault on our infrastructure -- "Urban Renewal/Removal."

The question was pursued last week when a group of us escalated the dialogue in a meeting room at Community College. "Is it still the case that 'Small Is Beautiful'? Or does

the 'mega-corporation' ensure that only a giant grouping can compete in any field - and that the masses must be peasants, with no ameliorating middle class to which the ambitious might aspire?"

It was rather obvious that several of those present who had attended the march certainly had not pursued this type of analysis. "Man, it was more like 'my identity' was threatened to the extent that I had to do something - right now, and this was a convenient avenue. Especially given that it had all the cultural and spiritual trappings. I just had to find myself for a moment, get away from this white, left crusade of 'multiculturalism'; as author Richard Rodriguez puts it, 'the odd parade'."

And so it has gone, both locally and in communication with other cities. Few, if any, gave thought to anything like an economic purpose or looked beyond an immediate need for a "spiritual revitalization", a time out from a wrenching angst - "An absolute must."

There also was comment to the

effect that African Americans have become a society as celebrity - obsessed as white, viz a viz "Elvis, Princess Diana, et al." A case in point was made by citing the failure of the African American "Pepsi Cola venture in Africa." Tens of millions were lost when adequate research and market studies were not performed.

The prospectus (invitation to invest) was celebrity-enhanced with the names of black notables from the entertainment community (Oprah Winfrey), the political arenas and, of course, the church. William Reed, the publisher of "Who's Who in Black Corporate America" says that "New opportunities will come along again."

From conversation like these and reading the African American Press, including other parts of the country, it becomes clear that an increasing number of blacks are determined to "get real", as it is often put. This time there seems a determination to understand the process and not to miss again the opportunities briefly presented by a fast-moving world. Cont'd.

# The Landscape RAINBOW PUSH COALITION

The New York City mayor's race reminds us that an other election cycle is beginning.

This fall there will be two gubernatorial elections, in New Jersey & Virginia. The 1998 primaries will start soon after, with 1/3 of the U.S. Senate at stake; the entire House of Representatives (including the Gingrich/Gephardt battle for Speaker, which may determine whether or not Dick Gephardt runs for President in 2000); most governor's seats; most state legislative seats; and hundreds of other key mayor, city council, county commission, and judicial races all around the country.

This week in the Rainbow/Push fax, we help set "the landscape" for these elections, with some key demographic and electoral facts for your use. (The data is taken from the 1996 census estimate of the U.S.

Census Bureau, by way of the Almanac of American Politics 1998.)

#### (1) The Population:

\*265,284,000 people live in America

\*75.6% of Americans are white

\*11.7% are African Americans

\*9.0% are Hispanics/Latinos

\*2.8% are Asian Americans

\*0.8% are Native Americans

\*Median per capita income = \$14,420

\*12.6% of Americans are 65+

\*The voting age population is 196,511,000

\*Registered voters = 146,211,960

(2) The U.S. Senate:

\*The republicans have firm control, but still lack at least 5 seats to be able to prevent filibusters.

\*There are 34 Senate seats up in 1998-16 republicans & 18 Democrats.

(3) The U.S. House of Representatives:

\*The republicans control the

House by a small margin, with 228 seats. The Democrats have 206, and Socialist Bernie Sanders of VT holds the remaining seat. Rep. Sanders would break the tie if the Democrats manage to win back 11 more seats in 1998.

\*The 1996 house vote was 49.0% for the GOP, 48.5% for the Democrats.

\*If the Democrats won back control of the House, the "presumptive" chairmen of several committees would be African Americans-Charles Rangel at Ways & Means; John Conyers at Judiciary; Bill Clay at Education & Labor; and Ron Dellums at National Security.

\*A quote from The Almanac: "One of the striking features of the 1996 election results is how voters in Democratic regions have become more Democratic, while voters in Republican regions have

become more Republican."

(4) The Governors:

\*Republicans dominate the governors' mansions around the country, holding 32, with only 17 Democrats, and 1 Independent in Maine.

\*If the republicans hold their current state line-up, they would have major advantages during the next round of reapportionment and redistricting.

\*There are 36 states with gubernatorial races in 1998 (23 GOP, 12 Democrats, 1 Independent)

(5) State Legislatures:

\*Because term limits in many states have created vast numbers of open seats next year, and because reapportionment and redistricting loom on the horizon, the 1998 state legislative races are even more important than usual.