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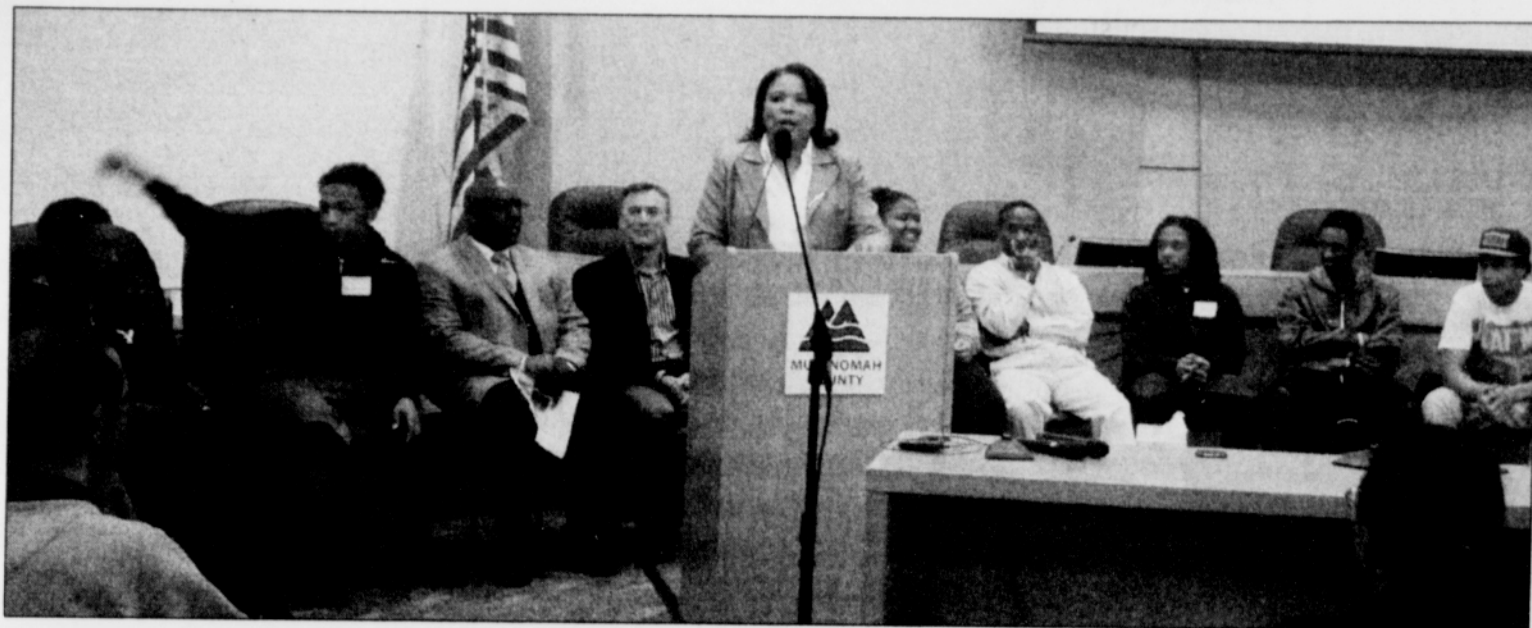
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What's on your list today?

LOCAL NEWS



CAPTION (photo #4261 in Smith folder): Commissioner Loretta Smith opens a town hall meeting on Wednesday, May 11th, where African American men were invited for the first time to speak about their lives while living in Portland.

African American Men Speak Out

BY MINDY COOPER

Last week on Wednesday, May 11th, Commissioner Loretta Smith hosted a special town hall event where African American men cross-generations shared their perspectives of community, resource distribution and what needs to change in order to attain a more equitable environment for minorities within the Portland area.

Smith explained the event is one that will go down in history.

When I first encountered the announcement for the meeting, I wasn't sure what the hype was all about. I read that Commissioner Smith was going to organize a time for Black men to speak at Town hall and share their perspectives, but I wanted to know what was on the agenda.

"What is the point?" I asked myself, and I was not alone in my curiosity.

Before the meeting began, whispers of conversations and skepticism filled the air. "I hope this isn't just an opportunity to make a political statement," one woman said.

But as chairs began to run out for the vast number of people gathering within the room, I glanced around at over 270 individuals from 12 to 70 years old who occupied the space meant for 190 people, making the importance of the evening suddenly very obvious that this group has something to say.

"There has never been a forum where African American men have been asked to come into the board room and give their input," said Commissioner Smith at the event on Wednesday night. "I am excited that there's a huge response, and youth are interested in our civic engage-

ment."

Smith explained that she more than reached her goal of the evening when she looked at the overwhelming turnout, which she said showed clearly these individuals don't feel they have a voice, and they never get asked about their situations.

"They are my bosses," said the commissioner. "I see this Town Hall as a unique opportunity to make a resounding statement to the community and to other elected officials."

As the only African American elected official within Multnomah County in 20 years, she has a unique perspective within the political arena in Portland to truly make a difference for the community, which has often been overshadowed in Portland politics.

"I've spent my entire adult life in Northeast Portland," she said. "When I look into the audience I see my son, and I see my friends."

Smith, who is the commissioner of District 2 that includes North and Northeast Portland, explained the county is at a pivotal point within its budget cycle, which requires the need to talk with people and understand what is and isn't working.

At the event on Wednesday, questionnaires were prepared to ask those who attended intimate details about their circumstances, including: 'Where do you feel most safe? What barriers to success do you confront? Where do you see yourself in five years?'

Although the results from the survey are currently being sorted, individuals had the opportunity at the meeting to take the microphone and answer two very big questions.

The first: what do you need to

make you feel successful in your life, and the second: What assistance does your community provide you?

After the event Smith explained, "Jobs was a huge issue, not only with our youth, but also with adults." She added that re-entry programs and mentors seemed to also be an important issue many people throughout the community are facing.

From jobs to education, health and housing, individuals one by one courageously spoke about their first-hand accounts of having differential access to resources, their circumstances and the issues they encounter while living within the city filled with environmental racism.

She further addressed the need for youth within the community to have places to go after school and in the summer. "This past month it has been really hot on the street," she explained. "I want to make sure that in this budget cycle we create policy and direct resources that will impact our underrepresented youth," said Smith.

At the meeting, kids asked for teachers who will listen to them when they ask questions, and spoke up for their educators who they believe deserve more resources to help them from a government that is supposed to protect them when they are in danger.

Smith added a lot of resources are spent on public safety, but they need to be spent on education and prevention.

"What I want to do is give a voice to this group, who histori-

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