

Aaron Turpeau memo:

The debate over the best strategic option for black leadership and the African American community as we approach the Mayoral election in Atlanta has become critical based on the fact that for the last 25 years Atlanta has represented the breakthrough for black political empowerment in the South.

It is debatable to what extent the objective socio-economic and political position of the African American community has improved. At the same time, most would agree that the Jackson breakthrough represented an unprecedented opportunity for black political representation nationwide.

A passionate argument has been made for us to develop a unity of purpose and position, and for that to be defined immediately, given the short amount of time remaining between now and November 2009 election day (two and ½ months from now). There are unstated assumptions that need to be examined. Perhaps the most critical factor is the lack of an agenda against which to evaluate candidates. An agenda, beyond just electing a Black Mayor, would allow us to move from the margins of the debate to controlling the expectations associated with gaining our support.

Three basic assertions have been made. They are as follows:

1. There is a chance for the first time in 25 years that African Americans could lose the Mayoral seat in Atlanta, Georgia, especially if there is a run-off;
2. Time is of the essence because in order to defeat a Norwood (white) mayoral candidacy we have to get out now and work in a manner to defeat her without a runoff, and the key is a significant Black turnout in the general election;
3. The reasons support should be given to Lisa Borders is: 1) she is the best black candidate in the race who has a chance to win the election because she can attract downtown white support; and 2) based on polling data drawn from a host of sources between May 2009 and July 2009, the numbers suggest Borders is growing stronger as we move closer to the election, while the most recent polling data suggests that the other black candidates are falling further behind over the same period.

There are also at least three unstated assumptions that should be further explored:

Unstated Assumption

1. With there is an unstated assumption that having a black mayor in Atlanta is equal to having a black social, economic and political agenda or at least someone in office who would be sensitive to that agenda if not a full promoter of that agenda;
2. By coming out for Borders now would eliminate Reed, Spikes and Thomas as viable candidates. Some would argue that if the polling data is correct then those candidates who are only polling at 8%, 2% and 1% respectively, are already effectively out of the race; and
3. It is unlikely that there will be a unified preference among existing black leadership and in the African American community for one candidate prior to the general election.

The Missing Factors in the Current Approach

There are at least seven real world common knowledge factors that must be taken into consideration as we debate how best to manifest our support in the run-up to the November elections. They are as follows:

1. The impact of current alienation among Black Atlantans from the political establishment;
2. The imperiled state of the Jackson Machine, (in part because of the displacement of close to 100,000 black residents over the past few years) and the effect operation of the NPU system by whites;
3. Shirley Franklin's perceived poor performance;
4. The changing demographics in the city, the potential role of new city voters and the diminished role of religious and labor leaders in mobilizing the black vote;
5. The importance of the City Council races (which to date seems to have been ignored);
6. The persistent poverty in the city, the educational crisis in the schools; the human security/public safety concerns; the type of economic development policies being pursued; and the city's awful financial management issues;
7. A Black Agenda that any candidate should be evaluated against.

What's At Stake?

Determining what's at stake depends on perspective:

1. The view that the times are too serious to stand on the sidelines is absolutely correct from the perspective of a black mayor

at all cost. In fact, if a white candidate were to win the 2009 mayoral race, it would be just as significant in political terms as Maynard Jackson's victory in 1973.

2. Therefore, the question becomes, if that were the case, how would African American interests be addressed; thus, the need for a comprehensive agenda. At the same time, just having a black mayor doesn't guarantee that African American issues and concerns would be effectively addressed either (as the current administration's relationship to the African American community clearly demonstrates). In other words, are we simply providing votes without any expectations of the candidate that would enjoy our support?;

3. While some may think that Franklin represents the last link to the Jackson Machine, it is not widely known that both Borders and Reed are directly connected to Franklin; or that Spikes and Thomas are Republicans, as is Norwood. Additionally, it should not be overlooked that whoever is Mayor of Atlanta will be in position to play an important role in the upcoming 2010 Georgia Governor's race;

4. The changing demographics which show a more rapid growth in the city's white population (faster and a higher percentage than anywhere else in the country) requires that we critically evaluate all candidates;

5. To ignore the alienation that exists among black voters towards the Franklin Administration's performance is naive at best and dishonest at worse; and finally,

6. We need an overall governance strategy and a definition of who really governs in Atlanta. In other words, in 2009 we have arrived at a place in time where we can no longer afford to just look at race in the Mayor's race or individual council races.

At the end of the day, "when the morning comes," a black agenda would better enable us to have our interests respected by and our influence realized in any administration.