

James Buford's Column

January 2006

At the beginning of each year, I write a column detailing the steps that need to be taken to benefit the African American community and the St. Louis metropolitan area as a whole. So, here is my wish list for 2006.

Seven years ago, I am many others participated in a demonstration on Highway 70 to demand fair access to opportunities for minority contractors. Today, there are more than \$3.6 billion worth of construction projects either planned or underway in the St. Louis region. From the \$500 million reconstruction of Highway 40 to the \$65 million expansion of the Hazelwood School District, it is imperative that blacks receive a fair share of the contracts in a metropolitan area that is 29% African American. It is time out for excuses from the white establishment that there are not enough qualified minority contractors or workers. The time has come for proactive stances to be taken. This region's success in the 21st century is dependant upon minority inclusion to spark economic development in the African American community. I also encourage elected officials to fight this fight for their constituents.

My second wish list item is for healthcare to become a priority for the area's indigent and underinsured. With African Americans being listed as high-risk for everything from heart disease to AIDS to poverty there is no doubt that Governor Matt Blunt's Medicaid cuts for working poor will adversely affect our community. Last year, approximately 90,000 low income families, elderly and disabled persons were cut from the state's Medicaid rolls. With these cuts being made there was little planning or concern for those who will fall through the cracks in the healthcare system. According to the Missouri Foundation for Health, the disparities in healthcare for African Americans are due to lower incomes, higher poverty rates, and less insurance coverage. This is why it is a crucial time to advocate for changes to be made in the State's Medicaid budget.

Last but not least, I hope that the black community will take a proactive stance against crime in our neighborhoods. Historically, the St. Louis area has suffered from a high

crime rate for many years. The City of St. Louis has always been the scene of a high concentration of violent crime. But it is in mainly African American neighborhoods that we witness a robust drug trade, thefts and murders. Despite the efforts or some may say lack of effort from the St. Louis Police Department, the crime rate continue to grow. I feel that it is crucial we, as African Americans, get seriously involved with crime prevention in our neighborhoods.

We need to take charge of our streets and become active in Neighborhood Watch Programs, the Federation of Block Units and other systems that set in place to fight crime. The quality of many black neighborhoods has gone down due to the lack of effort to preserve our streets. The Neighborhood Watch Program is comprised of residents interested in decreasing burglary and vandalism in their communities. The Federation of Block Units is a group dedicated to helping residents improves their communities. In addition, the St. Louis Police Department has an anonymous crime hotline, 241- COPS, that allows residents to give information on drugs, gangs and violent activity in their neighborhoods. Crime has truly become a plague in the black community and it is up to us to restore order to our streets.

These measures are some of the many steps that need to be taken to improve the quality of life for African Americans living in the St. Louis region. The time is now for African Americans in St. Louis to become proactive in increasing minority inclusion in government contracts, increasing healthcare access for low income individuals and getting crime off of our streets. I challenge all of us to become part of the solution and not the problem.