

# Minorities Still Wait for Positive Change

## Board of Contributors

AS I CONTEMPLATED writing this column, a number of thoughts passed through my mind. The one that made me focus more clearly on what I was to write was a familiar and popular song written by the late Sam Cooke: "A Change Is Gonna Come." The song has a smooth melody, one that makes you relax and reflect. It places you in an optimistic state of mind to face the daily challenges that await your arrival in the office.

In my current capacity as president and CEO of the Metropolitan Trenton African American Chamber of Commerce (MTAACC) I often ask myself a number of sobering questions: When are the conditions of many of New Jersey's urban communities going to change? When are minority businesses going to reap their full harvest? And when are residents going to become part of the vision of community leadership?

In my opinion, these communities, their residents and minority businesses are not in their current state due to a weak local economy or limited opportunities. Rather, it is because of a weakness in educational resources and community leadership. For example, many of New Jersey's cities are identified as low-income Abbott districts; therefore, they were allotted school construction projects ranging from a few hundred-million dollars to as much as \$1 billion. These local economies are further boosted by municipal and school-district procurement budgets, economic development projects and taxes

paid by corporations based in the communities.

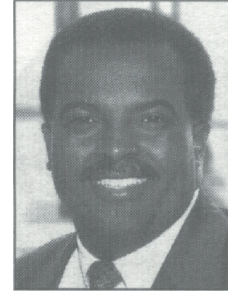
These procurement programs, if properly coordinated, could provide direct benefits to the local economy

However, the first question that comes up when you mention construction in an urban community is access: Can minority firms meet the basic requirements of bonding, insurance, experience, capacity, unions, etc.? These are just a few of the demands that must be satisfied before a proposal can be submitted for a contract. Furthermore, if there is an economic development project that contains union jobs, a laborer or skilled trade person must have a high school diploma or GED and a valid driver's license in order to participate.

Many of the businesses in urban communities are first-generation and may need additional support to help them grow to a sustainable level. This is why mentor/protege programs and properly structured joint ventures work.

Unfortunately, the situation is worsened by seasoned elected officials who govern cities in automatic-pilot mode, often taking their electorates for granted. This complacency contributes to the vulnerability of the populace and subjects them to negative influences with unappealing consequences.

If you add the current gang problems of these communities into the mix, matters become even more complicated. Those who associate with gangs have often been influenced by movies that promote a fantasy lifestyle



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with little regard for the consequences. Many gang members have a poor educational foundation and no exposure to alternatives to college like trade schools and apprenticeship programs that provide a level of compensation that can compete with drug dealing.

The root causes of many of the above-stated challenges are the weak educational foundation, poor planning by community leadership and limited assimilation of local residents and businesses into the economic mainstream. The educational foundation is critical because it provides people with options and the wherewithal to pursue a meaningful career with sustained benefits throughout all aspects of their lives.

Notwithstanding all of the above, I face each day with a sense of optimism and determination because that is truly the only way to approach the work that we do at MTAACC. Therefore, like the late Sam Cooke, I know that some day a change will come. ·