

Community Town Hall Meeting Report

Baton Rouge Black Chamber of Commerce

January 31, 2009

Prepared By: The Bayard Research Group, LLC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

On January 31, 2009, the Baton Rouge Black Chamber of Commerce hosted its first Community Town Hall Meeting for the year 2009. The meeting was held from 9:00 am to Noon at the Living Faith Christian Center at 6180 Winbourne Ave. The event was attended by residents of Baton Rouge, as well as local and state elected officials. The meeting was facilitated by Chris Tyson, the Chamber's Committee Chair of Government Relations.

Baton Rouge Black Chamber History & Purpose:

The Baton Rouge Black Chamber of Commerce (www.brblackchamber.org) was created in 2004 in response to a need for a coordinated voice for Baton Rouge area Black businesses. The Chamber offers networking, mentoring, training, business recognition, and other products and services to its members. The Chamber's mission is not only to provide these services to black businesses, but also to work to strengthen the Baton Rouge community as a whole; through Community Development, Economic Development, and Public Policy (www.metro12.org).

Mission and Purpose of the Community Town Meeting:

The Community Town Hall Meeting was a part of the Chamber's Public Policy Initiative and builds upon annual Community Summits.

The overall objectives of the town meeting included:

- Engaging residents of the Baton Rouge Community in identifying issues and strategies to address and remedy critical needs; and
- Developing an authentic plan of action, reflective of the perspectives of our communities and authored and verified by the Baton Rouge Black Chamber in an effort to guide the Chamber's Policy Agenda for 2009.

The event focused on large-scale citizen engagement through small-group, face-to-face dialogue, to deliberate about the complex issues facing the Baton Rouge community and the public policy measures necessary to make a difference.

This report is a compilation of their ideas and recommended action steps.

Meeting Topics:

The following are the initial topics created by the Chamber based on their assessment of the most critical policy issues facing the City of Baton Rouge, and particularly the Black Community. After being grouped based on table seating arrangements, participants were asked to discuss and select the top three policy areas they see as most critical. The topics and topic descriptions included:

▪ ***Minority Contracting***

While Baton Rouge's population is half minority, minority contractors make up less than 2% of those obtaining City contracts. Increasing the pipeline of minority-owned businesses prepared to take advantage of these contracting opportunities and the number of those actually obtaining contracts is critical to economic development in inner city Baton Rouge.

▪ ***Neighborhood Safety and Crime/Violence***

Baton Rouge's inner city neighborhoods continue to experience high levels of crime and violence relative to the rest of the city. Increased community engagement with anti-crime and anti-violence measures, in addition to other measures, has proven to help stem the tide of crime in inner city communities.

▪ ***Economic development in inner city Baton Rouge***

The Plank Road, Airline Highway and Scenic Highway corridors are evidence of the economic decline of the city's inner city. Developing meaningful incentives and partnerships to grow business investment in these and other blighted areas is key to reducing the poverty, crime and general decline present in these areas.

▪ ***The Public School System***

Currently an additional 8 local schools – all of them with predominately black student populations – are slated to be removed from the East Baton Rouge Parish School System to the Louisiana Recovery District system. Recent battles over the state takeover have exposed divisions around race and class. Organizing the minority business community as well as the larger area business community around supporting public education could be a valuable intervention.

▪ ***Race Relations***

Baton Rouge remains residentially segregated largely between the northern and southern part of the city. This division has deep roots, a particular history and reflects unresolved tensions that not only perpetuate racist attitudes and behaviors, but serve as a barrier to economic development and the advancement of the entire region. Developing partnerships to begin a sustainable and meaningful project around healing racial divisions is key to the region's advancement.

▪ ***Public Transportation Improvement***

Residents of inner city Baton Rouge disproportionately depend upon public transportation not only to access employment but to carry out everyday activities. Outside consultants have surveyed the system and determined that it suffers from weak public support and offers a bare-bones service that will require considerable additional public investment in order to grow and reach additional residents. Calling attention to the needs of the public transportation system and finding new sources of funding will dramatically improve the quality of life in inner city Baton Rouge.

**Top Three Public Policy Priorities Identified
By The Baton Rouge Black Chamber Community Town Hall Meeting**

After discussing the proposed topics, each table was provided the opportunity to present the three most critical policy issues and why they saw them as most critical to the City of Baton Rouge and the Black Community.

After each table discussed their topics, it was determined by all attendees that the most critical policy areas facing Baton Rouge and Baton Rouge's Black Community are (*in no specific order*):

- **Race Relations**
- **Minority Contract; and**
- **Public Schools**

RACE RELATIONS

Emerging Themes:

Participants agreed that race relations is a much needed topic of discussion, between and among all ethnic groups, within the Baton Rouge Community. Ideas discussed included racial reconciliation, racial inclusiveness in policy making, racial accountability, the role geography plays in race relations (North Baton Rouge vs. South Baton Rouge), and the need for true racial integration full-time, not only during specific events or organized activities. The group acknowledged that the faith based community is one example of racial segregation at its worst.

The group mentioned examples of non-faith based groups that work to attract diverse members; however, more often than not it is the same group of individuals that are active participants in these organizations.

The group also discussed the need for more diversity across City Departments and Boards. Participants agreed that on the idea of ***“ensuring ethnic and gender diversity brings an extra consciousness when shaping policies.”***

Recommended Action Steps:

- The group requested that the Chamber access data on the diversity (gender, geography, and race) across City Departments and Boards
- The participants challenged churches and other faith based organizations to set specific dates to bring different faiths together for activities, outside of normal fellowship services.
- The group recommended the Mayor proclaim “Race Relations Day.” A day when all citizens of Baton Rouge spend time exposing themselves to different cultures from themselves.
- Identify a diverse group of businesses and organizations that can sponsor more events such as Live After Five, allowing more opportunities for diverse gatherings and engagement.
- The participants agreed that there is a noticeable difference in the economic investments between the northern and southern areas of the parish. The group identified the Scenic Highway, Plank Road, and portions of Airline Highway as the most neglected areas within the City. The group requested that the Baton Rouge Black Chamber work with various economic development groups and the City of Baton Rouge to ensure that there is equity in urban investment across East Baton Rouge parish.

- The participants agreed that the Baton Rouge Black Chamber should work to support policies that integrate and not segregate our public schools. The group indicated incentives are needed, including better quality public schools, to encourage more white students to return to the public school system.

MINORITY CONTRACTING

Emerging Themes:

A recurring question among participants asked “Where and how do I find opportunities to apply for local contracts?” Another recurring theme was the challenges minority companies have qualifying for contracts and the need for the City to conduct more business with small women and minority owned firms.

Recommended Action Steps:

- The Chamber creates a partnership with the City Parish Purchasing Department and the State of Louisiana Contracting Office to conduct outreach services on open bids available.
- The Chamber should assist minority and female businesses apply for bids, qualify for bids, and establish joint ventures.
- The Chamber charges the City Council and Mayor’s Office to provide a 20% incentive for hiring minority owned companies on projects.
- The Chamber conducts research on federal resources that can help provide technical assistance to women and minority owned business to help build their capacity to compete for bids.
- The Chamber, through its Metro12 initiative, should conduct a study on the City of Atlanta and how former Mayor Maynard Jackson helped increase minority business participation through City Contract benchmarks and incentives.
- The Chamber, through its Metro12 initiative, conducts a study on the impact of minority participation on state contracts after the minority incentive program was eliminate by former Governor Mike Foster.
- The Chamber continue to bring key Stakeholders & decision-makers from across the City, to the table for discussions involving greater minority contracting opportunities for minority and women owned businesses in the City of Baton Rouge.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Emerging Themes:

The group acknowledged that East Baton Rouge has challenges in offering a quality public education, consistently across all public schools. The group also expressed the need for stronger parental involvement, yet an appreciation for the fact that many parents do not have the support system they need to be successful in providing educational support their children need and that the ***“community is responsible for every child, not just our own children.”***

The group also identified the need for better physical structures/building, equip with technology to educate our children. Finally, participants correlated the City’s poor transportation infrastructure as a hindrance for parents to be involved in their children’s education with extracurricular parental activities.

Recommended Action Steps:

- Increase grassroots efforts to improve educational services in public schools; including
 - Partnerships with Faith Based and Non-Profit Organizations,
 - Exposing students to a world outside of Baton Rouge,
 - Providing opportunities for families to visit other School Districts and take note of more effective learning strategies and operations.
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- The participants recommended that the Chamber work with the East Baton Rouge Public School System and Charter Schools to create a Parent University. The parent university would educate parents on public policy issues that impact their children and provide parents with the support they need to be successful parents. The Parent University might include:
 - Parental assistant in helping children with homework;
 - Parent support groups
- The group also recommends that the Baton Rouge Black Chamber adopt a school and focus on strategies to keep parents involved in their children’s education.
- Participants mentioned the need for newer schools equip with technology.
- The group concluded that not all Baton Rouge youth are college material and their needs to be more alternatives to higher education, including more innovative and nontraditional trade and workforce development programs. The group also believes that all high schools should offer trades such as shop class and mechanics, and promote the arts.

- The group fully supports early childcare education, both PreK and HeadStart. The group encourages the Chamber to be engaged on policies that support expansions of both programs.
- The participants concluded that there are lots of misconceptions regarding the Charter School System and requested that the Chamber partner with Charter Schools/Association to conduct workshops on the benefits and detriments of charter schools and how they operate.
- All participants saw a need for qualified and competent teachers, but understood that the state and the parish need to create incentive programs to help recruit and retain highly qualified teachers.
- The Chamber was also charged to work with the East Baton Rouge Parish School System to create “Saturday School.” The school would serve students who are academically challenged and would be taught by retired teachers.

Call for Change:

In November 2008, the United States and the world stood for change, not only for America, but for every town, village, and borough across the globe. The Baton Rouge Black Chamber of Commerce encourages the citizens of Baton Rouge to embrace change, and embrace change with inclusive policy strategies that uplift all.

There are many challenges facing the Baton Rouge community – especially in our inner city where economic development, blight, crime and other urban problems require immediate attention. We must be ready to work with our policy makers and elected officials to ensure that we bring change to our communities.

The Community Town Hall Meeting is a first step – through it we intend to create an agenda for 2009 that is bottom-up as opposed to top-down. Inclusive policy change is a people-driven exercise that encourages and supports every citizen's capacity to participate in the public policy process on issues that impact their lives and encourage our communities to incorporate deliberative processes to address major public policy issues.

The Chamber welcomes your participation in helping bring the changes mentioned in this 2009 Community Town Hall Meeting Final Report to reality. Please contact us at

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