

When you know better...You do better

By: Dallas S. Jones

In a couple of days Houstonians will return to the voting booths to elect their local government. Many are vying for seats on Houston City Council and other governing bodies. African Americans in this city must truly examine what is at risk over the next two years. The times have changed with the addition of new city council seats and the redrawing of many political districts. There is a possibility to elect another African American to the council with the addition of the newly formed District K.

In addition, voters must consider the retention of the At Large #5 City Council seat which has traditionally been held by an African American. There is also an opportunity to elect an African American to the At Large #2 seat that is being vacated by Sue Lovell. A swell of African American voters in this election could truly change the composition of the council. The retention of Councilmember C.O. Bradford combined with that of Councilmember Wanda Adams and the all African American field in District B would produce the most African Americans ever to serve on the Houston City Council. I recognize to many this seems like a highly unlikely scenario, while I say it's certainly possible.

This brings us back to the age old conversation about the power of community and our vote. As early voting has begun we see some of the highest voter apathy in the areas that are traditionally African American. This tells me that we have not done a good job in telling the story about what these elections could yield for the entire African American community in Houston. By no means am I saying the elections should solely be about race. There are some wonderful candidates in every race that are not of African descent but have done some important things to improve to the quality of life of African American Houstonians. They should be commended. Many of them should be returned to office.

The conversation is really about understanding and seizing opportunities to improve the advancement of an entire community in the political and business sectors throughout our city. There are still tremendous disparities that exist between African Americans and Anglos around the country and certainly here in Houston. The wealth gap continues to be a reality in addition to differences in neighborhood conditions, crime, and unemployment that adversely affect communities of color in this city. Who better to have these conversations than those that live with the realities every day. Our organizations that are designed to mobilize and empower voters have to do a better job of telling this story. I certainly recognize in this economy there are challenges around budgets and funding. It is incumbent on those that have broken through some of the economic challenges of the times to help keep these organizations viable, but more importantly effective.

Proper strategic planning combined with a coordination of available resources could have organized an effective voter campaign to mobilize the African American community. This exercise would have certainly been a precursor for the challenges to come in 2012 when we look to re-elect President Barack Obama. As we look at the voter apathy that is running rampant through communities of color in 2011, we hope this is not an indicator of what's to come. We hope.

“When you know better, you do better.” This is one of the earliest lessons that I learned as a child. The African American community has increased in political muscle significantly since the creation of minority voting districts in the seventies. We’ve learned the power of our voting strength. The question becomes do we stay complacent with what has been attained or continue to look for new ways to increase the influence that people of color have in government? I think we know the answer. Now that we’ve seen the power of what can be accomplished it’s time that we do better about creating new opportunities and seizing new challenges.