

Looking for leadership

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Shortly after the Oregon Legislature adjourned in July, state Sen. Avel Gordly, a Portland native with 16 years of experience as a lawmaker, announced she would retire when her term expires at the end of 2008. Her decision to not seek re-election raises the possibility that African Americans in Portland will be left with a single legislator -- Sen. Margaret Carter -- to represent their interests in Salem.

Gordly's impending departure raises other questions:

Who will lead and speak for Portland's black community? No black person serves on the Portland City Council or Multnomah County Board of Commissioners. Sonja Henning, a relative newcomer, is the only black person on the Portland School Board.

Is Portland's black community losing political power and visibility? Does it matter in a city where 7 percent of residents are African American? Where will the future leadership come from? What are the obstacles to greater political participation?

Things weren't always this way. Beginning in the early 1970s, Portland saw a small but steady stream of African Americans win election to local and state offices, including judgeships. Later, the top appointed jobs at the Portland School District and Portland Police Bureau were filled by black men.

We asked a cross-section of 12 politically involved citizens -- black and otherwise -- to respond to these questions. Many asserted that a new generation of homegrown leaders is already in place.

Charles McGee

A few days ago as I walked downtown something hit me. We live in a city with two tales. One side of the city is a thriving, urban metropolis; the other is an economically and socially dejected island struggling to be treated as an equal shareholder.

Racism and classism had long ago drawn a figurative line in the sand: On one side lay a community fighting for cultural survival, jobs to pay the bills and food to eat. On the other side lived a thriving city with condos, street cars, hybrids and people living comfortable organic lives.

For a long time, our elders had limited ability to impact the institutionalized racism in our governments, businesses and neighborhoods. Internal community strength, coalition-building and focus were required of our elders - focus on our own individual community issues borne of need. I have tremendous respect for the path forged by my community of previous generations. But for their work, my words would not be before you now. We have spent several centuries looking inward, pulling upward, and moving forward. Now, it is time to look outward.

If Portland's African American community is to recover from this tale of two cities, we must begin to build broader alliances with other communities of color. Much of this building has already begun through informal dialogues, new friendships and partnerships among Portland's young and fresh-thinking leaders of color from the Latino, Asian, Native American and African American communities. We recognize our commonalities, support our own need for community self-determination and accept our responsibility to bring inspiration, hope and vision to our communities and the city that we all love: Portland.

In the past, singular community focus was essential to our survival as a community. And we are here today because of it. Over and over we have seen how oppressive systems have taken advantage of this focus to create mistrust or worse among communities of color. Now, we realize our commonalities are stronger than the issues that might appear to divide us. We are beginning to understand that we can care about our own people, and value others' histories and struggles as well. I feel good when my Latino, Native American and Asian sisters and brothers share my joy and accomplishments, as well as my struggles.

We still have work to do together. Yes, our students are not being served in the traditional school system. Yes, our professionals and trained work forces often do not benefit from "old boy" networks or are still passed over for promotion. And yes, gentrification is occurring. The crime is not gentrification or the apparent inability of the school system to educate our children. Rather, the crime is the systematic erosion of everything Portland says it believes in; diversity, free expression and strong public schools.

Ask me who will lead Portland's African American community, and I reply: The responsibility to unite two cities into one strong, beautifully diverse and thriving one lies upon every person in every household and on every street. After all this is Portland, right?

Charles McGee is president and CEO of the Black Parent Initiative, a nonprofit program that seeks to boost educational achievement by African American students. A graduate of Franklin High School, he ran for the Portland School Board in 2006.