

(1/30/09): Cincinnati NAACP Letter to President Obama Regarding City Streetcar Plan



January 30, 2009

Barack Obama
President of the United States of America
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Obama:

My name is Christopher Smitherman and I am the president of the Cincinnati, Ohio NAACP Unit. The Cincinnati Branch is one of the oldest units in the country; it was founded in 1915. The Cincinnati NAACP hosted the 99th Annual NAACP Convention of which you were one of the guest speakers. It was a pleasure meeting you and congratulations on your successful campaign win of the U.S. presidency. I think your first week and a half in office has demonstrated tremendous leadership to our country and to the world.

The purpose of my communication with you is related to the stimulus package that the House and Senate will pass next week and you will sign. It has been brought to my attention that the Mayor of Cincinnati and City Councilmembers (and most likely lobbyists from our region) have been lobbying your office to direct part of the stimulus funding to a streetcar project for downtown Cincinnati. I would like your office to know that the Cincinnati NAACP has initiated a petition and has been collecting signatures to place the streetcar plan on the November ballot for citizens to approve or reject the plan. In the past two years, the Cincinnati NAACP along with local organizations such as We Demand A Vote, COAST, the Green Party, the Libertarian Party, and others, has placed three issues on the ballot; November 2007 and 2008. The ballots resulted in stopping the county from building a mega jail via increased sales tax; stopping the City from installing Red Light Cameras to ticket citizens by mail in order to raise \$1 million in revenue; and in attempting to revise the City Council election process from a "winner-take-all" system to proportional representation (PR). Two of the three initiatives in two elections were passed successfully. The PR initiative failed by less than 6,500 votes.

I highly doubt that those lobbying you for funding of the streetcar have informed you that there is a grassroots effort to place the streetcar issue on the ballot by the Cincinnati NAACP. Nor do I believe that the lobbyists have informed you of the Branch's success with recent ballot initiatives as stated above. The Cincinnati NAACP general membership opposes the streetcar plan because it does not believe that spending \$200 million of taxpayer dollars on a trolley that runs 2-3 miles around the downtown area is a priority in the deep recession.

The Cincinnati NAACP does support light rail, but President Obama, the streetcar plan is a pet project of our City Councilmember, Chris Bortz. Councilmember Bortz is the chair of the City's Economic Development Committee and is also the active lawyer for his family's local development company, Towne Properties. Mr. Bortz has been advancing this project through the City Council and actually casting votes in favor of the plan. As the president of the Cincinnati NAACP, I have continually brought to Council's attention, and the Mayor, that Mr. Bortz's involvement with this project is a conflict of interest. President Obama, I know that you are well aware that across the country there are such conflicts of interest that undermine the citizens' confidence in the public policymakers. When the Cincinnati NAACP raises these issues, the responders claim that we are making personal attacks. They argue that our claims of conflicts of interest are personal attacks as a strategy for avoiding answering the concrete question, in this case: "Does Councilmember Bortz own property along the proposed streetcar path that he is actively advancing and will he/his family business in any way financially benefit from the project?"

Mr. President, it is predicted that the unemployment rates for African Americans in the City of Cincinnati will hit 25-30% in 2009. The City's African American population is 45%. This means that unemployment of African Americans in the City of Cincinnati will reach The Great Depression levels while the broader unemployment rate will be 9-10% this year. The Urban Core will be under tremendous economic stress; therefore, it is my recommendation that ALL stimulus package funding for capital improvements sent to our region should be mandated toward use for infrastructure repair and expansion, **not pet projects** that do not have broad consensus from the community.

Also, the Greater Cincinnati Metropolitan area has a terrible record of hiring African Americans and doing business with local, African American owned SBEs. President Obama, please ask the Mayor, Cincinnati City Councilmembers, and the Hamilton County Commissioners, "**What is your record with SBEs?**" and require a response. I am very glad that you are working on stimulating the economy. I simply wanted to provide you with a different perspective on how the resources from your plan, once approved, should be spent in our region to truly

stimulate our local economy for all citizens. We need to focus on bread-and-butter projects such as repairing sidewalks, medians, potholes; or expanding driving lanes on Interstates 71 and 75 to reduce traffic congestion; etc.

Thank you for your time. I am available to speak with any of your staff members on this topic. I can be reached at 513-281-1900 or at this e-mail address, naacp.cincinnati@gmail.com. Again, it was a pleasure to meet you this summer as your host of the 99th Annual NAACP Convention and I hope to meet you again.

Respectfully,

Christopher Smitherman, President
Cincinnati NAACP Branch

cc: Congressman John Conyers
Governor Strickland
Mayor Mark Mallory
Cincinnati City Council