January 14, 2008

Dear Sir/Madam:

The time is now to create more opportunities for the working class. There are many Shelby County citizens who desire to be a productive part of society. However, they feel as though their resources are limited. In some cases, this may be true. But in the majority of these situations, these men and women have opportunities but do not know how to access the resources they need.

The time is now for us to come together and create a plan that will enable people to be self sufficient and proud of their ability to be a contributing part of the Memphis community.

It is at this time I elicit your support. I will be conducting a Community Round Table Friday, January 25, 2008, at 10:00 a.m. The meeting will be held in the fourth floor conference room of the Shelby County Administration building located at 160 North Main Street. The issues on the agenda include education and economic and community development.

It is now time to make improvements in our city, and I look forward to you coming to the meeting to share your creativity and expertise.

Sincerely,

James Harvey, Sr., Commissioner
Shelby County Board of Commissioners

JH:cp
County commissioner builds GED foundation with churches, nonprofits

By Alex Doniach

Saturday, January 5, 2008

The idea struck County Commissioner James Harvey while walking through the Operation Safe Surrender program at New Salem Baptist Church in September.

Harvey marveled at how the program partnered church leaders and law enforcement officials to help some 300 people with outstanding warrants turn themselves in and get their lives back on track.

"I was in awe," he said.

With the hope that community-based initiatives could work, Harvey was inspired this fall to launch his own grassroots economic development program.

Still in its planning stages, the program would help develop the economy by connecting county residents to free GED programs. It would also pair former felons with attorneys who could help them restore their voting rights for free.

The program would be run through nonprofit organizations and churches willing to participate, and would be open to everyone.

And while education and voting rights may not appear to be an obvious pair, Harvey said both deal with empowerment and hope -- qualities missing from some of the poorest members of society.

"We need to create opportunities for people left out of the economic process," he said.

Harvey, a businessman for 20 years, said he has learned continued education is the key to success, crime reduction and closer communities.

The first-term Democrat is finishing his own education and is hoping to receive his bachelor's degree in business management from the University of Phoenix in Cordova by the end of the year. He also wants to run for Memphis mayor in 2011, but only if Mayor Willie Herenton chooses not to.

Harvey has hosted three informal gatherings at the County Commission offices,
attended each time by up to 40 church, government, business, nonprofit and community leaders and citizens.

Robert Gordon, an executive vice president and chief administrative officer for Baptist Memorial Health Care Corp., said this kind of group is helpful because it prevents duplication of services by bringing people together to see "what we already have in place."

Harvey is working to sign on willing attorneys and community GED programs to offer services for free. He's hoping to enlist 12 programs throughout the city and county, based mainly in churches.

One program already on board is offered through the Greater Faith Tabernacle Church in Whitehaven. It offers free night classes, taught my Memphis City School teachers, to help residents attain a GED.

While 2005 estimates from the U. S. Census Bureau show about 19 percent of adults in Memphis don't have a high school diploma, founding member Felicia Lee said that percentage is much higher in Whitehaven.

"We felt that if you offer something in a non-threatening way at no charge, people are more apt to say, 'Yes, I can do it,' " Lee said.

Harvey said his goal is to see every county resident obtain a GED or high school diploma and develop the skills to build a better workforce.

"We're not great if we're leaving people behind," he said.

-- Alex Doniach: 529-5231

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