

# Blacks call for city to act on quality-of-life improvements

## Committee's final report offers 55 recommendations in six areas.

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AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Friday, October 28, 2005

Reaching a milestone in a city-led examination that questioned Austin's reputation as a great place to live for all, the City Council on Thursday endorsed a detailed two-year plan to improve the quality of life of African Americans.

Closing a presentation lasting almost three hours, council members said they are committed to implementing the plan, which would tap more than \$700,000 in city money to achieve its goals.

Earlier, the president of the Austin chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People said the city finds itself at an historic crossroads.

"You have an opportunity, not just in words but dollars and commitment, to show that African Americans deserve the same treatment and investments that you show" to others, Nelson Linder said.

Linder and black leaders joined city staff members in presenting a blueprint for implementing 55 recommendations to improve conditions for black Austinites.

The report covers six areas: arts, culture and entertainment; business and economic development; employment and education; health; neighborhood sustainability; and police and safety.

It cites a number of initiatives the city already has begun, such as forming a team to improve health and access to primary and preventative care among African Americans and evaluating current cultural sensitivity training for police.

City officials also said Thursday that arts and entertainment recommendations led to a city agreement to co-sponsor new African American cultural events in 2006, including a film festival in February and an urban music festival in April.

Some of the more notable recommendations Thursday address use of force by police and problem officers.

A police and safety subcommittee, which included officers, recommended revising the use-of-force policy to emphasize disablement "through use of less-lethal force."

Cathy Ellison, an assistant Austin police chief who co-chaired the subcommittee, said the department already teaches officers to use only the force necessary to bring a situation under control.

Linder, who co-chaired the same subcommittee, said a policy of disablement is not really new "because white folks already have it. We're saying as a courtesy, treat African Americans and Hispanics with the same respect."

Another recommendation calls for identifying problem officers and documenting inappropriate behavior.

In overflow public hearings and community discussions that began in the spring, African American residents spoke about problems with Austin police, from insensitivity and slow response rates to the shooting deaths of unarmed blacks and Latinos and use of excessive force when dealing with minority suspects.

Many black residents voiced other frustrations. They said Austin isn't as welcoming to blacks as it is to others and that they felt left out of the city's economic and cultural picture. Blacks are leaving Austin for the suburbs or for jobs and a cultural scene in cities such as Atlanta and Dallas, they said.

African American organizations first presented the council with quality-of-life recommendations in June, after months of public discussion.

But culminating a process that began last year, the report presented Thursday night was more detailed, the

result of four months of work by committees of residents and city staff members. The committees refined the proposals and set performance measures and timetables for implementing them. They agreed with most of the original recommendations and modified others.

"Sometimes we just had to agree to disagree," said Byron Marshall of the Austin Revitalization Authority, who co-chaired the neighborhood sustainability subcommittee. "But we have agreed to move forward to try to reach resolution."

The effort to explore quality of life for African Americans began in September 2004 but reached public view on the heels of the February fire at Midtown Live, a nightclub popular among African Americans. As the blaze destroyed the club, police and dispatchers exchanged computer messages, such as "Burn baby, burn."

The incident further exposed lingering racial wounds and longstanding, tattered relationships between police and African Americans.

City Manager Toby Futrell acknowledged in a March memo to the council that over the past two years a series of serious incidents with police "raised community concerns about race relations" She initiated a quality-of-life scorecard, which the city demographer began last fall.

That same month, Futrell and Police Chief Stan Knee asked the U.S. Department of Justice to review the Police Department's policies and practices. Futrell cited eroding public trust in the wake of the Midtown fire, as well as an Austin American-Statesman series last year that reported that officers used force against blacks and Hispanics at higher rates than against whites.

The city's quality-of-life study found that Austin's black population fared well when compared with African Americans in cities across the country with regard to income, education levels, poverty and unemployment rates.

However, the African American share of the total city population is declining, and black Austinites are struggling to keep up in terms of income, educational attainment and home and business ownership.

Based largely on census data and a small informal survey, the scorecard said the city lacked a cultural and social infrastructure that creates a sense of belonging among African Americans.

"This is troubling because Austin prides itself on being a place where everybody wants to live," Assistant City Manager Michael McDonald said at the outset of Thursday's hearing.

After the meeting, Linder said city money earmarked for quality of life issues is "not even a down payment on what needs to be done. That's the most important thing, not just the idea.

"I'm going to challenge them to put their money where their mouth is."

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### **Suggestions to improve quality of black lives**

Among the recommendations for improving the quality of life for African American in Austin are:

- Create an African American Cultural Arts District as a component of a citywide Community Cultural Arts Plan in 2006.
- Ask companies receiving city incentives to incorporate minority- and women-owned business goals in their hiring.
- Provide African American business organizations an opportunity to meet with companies seeking incentives from the city.

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