

Voting Rights Act deserves re-authorization

By George Curry

Special to Sentinel-Voice

ATLANTA - In 1965, my senior year at Druid High School in Tuscaloosa, Ala., I participated in the last leg of the Selma-to-Montgomery, Ala. march seeking passage of a federal Voting Rights Act. Ultimately, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the bill into law. Last Saturday, I found myself in the middle of another march, this one to extend key sections of the law set to expire in 2007.

One should not minimize the dramatic progress that has been made over the past four decades. Because of the poll tax, phony literacy tests, violence and intimidation, African-Americans were denied access to the ballot box. The 1965 Voting Rights Act, as civil rights activists are quick to note, was a result of Black demands, not the good intentions of Congress or LBJ.

In fact, Johnson, who was the greatest U.S. president on domestic issues — far exceeding anything ever accomplished by Bill Clinton — did not think Congress would pass such a bill. So, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) took to the streets, forcing Congress and Johnson to act.

Consequently, the number of Black elected officials increased from 1,469 in 1970, the first year they were compiled, to

9,101 in 2001, according to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

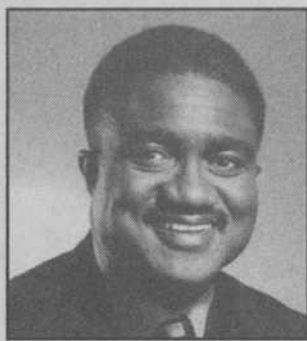
Despite what is being circulated on the Internet, African-Americans will not lose the right to vote if the three sections of the Voting Rights Act are allowed to expire. The 15th Amendment to the Constitution, passed in 1870, gives every citizen the right to vote.

However, the 15th Amendment did not become meaningful in the lives of Blacks until passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Of particular interest is Section 5 of the law. It requires states, cities and other political jurisdictions with a history of voter discrimination to obtain approval from the U.S. Department of Justice before making changes to their voting systems.

This pre-clearance provision was placed into the law to make sure that even inadvertent changes do not unfairly dilute Black political strength.

Although the other two sections scheduled to expire are not as well known, they, too, are extremely important.

One allows the Justice Department to send observers into areas where there have been allegations of voter fraud. Another provision is significant to the growing Latino popula-



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tion because it mandates bilingual ballots and language assistance in districts or precincts where many of the residents do not speak English.

An unintended by-product of the drive to renew key sections of the Voting Rights Act is that African-Americans and Latinos are working closely to protect their mutual interests and, in the process, repair un-

acknowledged tension that is said to come from political and employment competition. A recent report by the Southern Poverty Law Center concluded, "...Like the Civil Rights Era alliance between Blacks and Jews, the Black/Brown coalition has grown more and more strained. Many Blacks resent what is seen as Hispanics leapfrogging them on the economic ladder, and some complain of the skin-color prejudices that are particularly strong in some Hispanic countries, notably Mexico."

It continues, "The conflict is growing, as many Hispanic immigrants, legal and illegal, pour into neighborhoods that were, in many cases, previously dominated by Blacks."

Tension notwithstanding, both groups face discrimination.

USA Today carried an article last week that demonstrates the continued need for federal

protection. In 2001, an unprecedented number of African-Americans decided to seek public office in Kilmichael, Miss.

But three weeks before the election, the mayor and five-member Board of Aldermen cancelled the election. The Justice Department said the change represented a violation of the Voting Rights Act. Two years later, the town of 830 people elected its first Black mayor, along with three African-American aldermen.

The problems haven't been limited to small towns in Mississippi.

Earlier this year, Georgia passed what is believed to be the most restrictive voter identification law in the nation. It requires voters to present a driver's license or other government-issued photo ID before being allowed to vote. In the past, about a dozen forms of identification were accepted, including utility bills and Social Security cards.

The Atlanta Constitution stated in an editorial, "...It's hard not to draw the conclusion that the Republican-dominated Legislature and Gov. Sonny Perdue, the state's first GOP chief executive in more than a century, want to restrict voting for partisan gain."

Those are two of many examples of why the Voting Rights Act needs to be extended.

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Summit to target political, economic lot of Blacks

By James Clingman

Special to Sentinel-Voice

On August 20, Black folks from across the country will convene on Detroit, Mich. But, more importantly, Detroiters themselves will converge in Cobo Hall to make a bold, action-oriented commitment regarding their economic and political empowerment. The Motor City, which is 85 percent Black, is at the forefront of what will be a national initiative to develop and sustain Black business enclaves wherever sizeable groups of Black people reside in this country. The reality is that when the Black business district comes to fruition in Detroit, other cities will follow its lead by planning, promoting and developing similar enclaves.

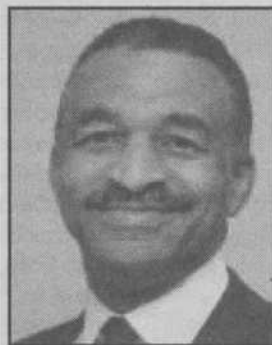
You have probably heard by now about the proposal to build a Black business district in Detroit, which has created somewhat of a furor in that city among politicians and business persons. Despite Detroit's overwhelming majority Black population, there is no African-American business district. Yet, there are several different ethnic business districts.

To think that some, including a few

Blacks, have called the plan to develop such a district "racist," "separatist," and "divisive," simply defies logic and speaks to the desperate economic state of our people in general. Additionally, the resistance to an effort to showcase and economically empower the majority population of Detroit, lets us know that unseen hands and higher forces are at work to keep Black folks in Detroit economically enslaved.

Why hasn't anyone called Greek Town, Mexican Town, Polish Town, Korea Town, China Town, Hockey Town, and similar enclaves "racist" and "separatist"? I cannot believe that Blacks in Detroit will not move forward with establishing their own business district. Anyone with an ounce of sense knows it's not racism that drives these districts; it's economics.

What sense does it make for African-Americans to subscribe to the notion of "majority rule" and not utilize that principle when we are in the majority? Some Black folks in



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Detroit, and elsewhere, are still looking for "minority" set asides and Minority Business Enterprise programs — despite being in the majority. As a matter of fact, in Cincinnati where I live, Blacks make up nearly 50 percent of the population. That, combined with the percentages comprised by Hispanics and Asians would create a majority for people of

color. Yet, these groups collectively allow the city to play fast and loose with public dollars, and they are subjected to "minority" rules in "minority" programs. How silly is that?

Detroit can set the example of what must be done to put Black people in this country back on the road to economic prosperity. Yes, I said "back" on the road. Whether you realize it or not, our relatives have been there and done that when it comes to economic empowerment, by building and sustaining economic enclaves across the country despite the horrendous treatment they suffered.

So, as I asked in a previous article, what

are you going to do, Detroit? Are you going to lead, or will you continue to follow? Will you rightly assume your correct and deserved position at the head of the table, in the "power seat"? Or, will you continue to sit on the floor, hoping a few crumbs will fall down for you to pick up? Will you correct the inappropriate behavior of the past, such as, settling for a minority economic position despite being the majority? Or, will you persist with the inappropriate behavior of denying who you are, being ashamed of your Black heritage, and the self-deprecating practice of working against your own best economic interests and those of your children?

Make the proper decision and come out August 20 to the "Black is Back" Povernomics Economic Summit. This will be a day of serious commitment to restore and rebuild an economic infrastructure for the majority of Detroit's citizens. The speakers will include Claud Anderson, Bob Law, Rosie Milligan, Amefika Gueka, Kwame Kenyatta, Joann Watson, Barbara Rose Collins, Dorothy Tillman and other conscious brothers and sisters that do much more than just talk

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what the death penalty should be called, because African-Americans are disproportionately represented among people condemned to death in the USA. The African-American population represents about 12 percent of the national population but accounts for more than 40 percent of the country's current death-row inmates, and represents one of every three prisoners executed since 1977 when judicial killing resumed.

Furthermore, not only do innocent people convicted of crimes have to deal with racist prosecutors, a bill passed by Congress on July 6 could send hundreds of innocent people to

the death chamber. They have launched a new effort to speed up executions in the United States by limiting the ability of those sentenced to death to appeal to federal courts. The "Streamlined Procedures Act of 2005," introduced in the House by California Representative Dan Lungren and in the Senate by Arizona Senator Jon Kyl, would limit the ability of defendants facing the death sentence to have their cases reviewed by federal courts in what are known as habeas corpus appeals. This will strip the ability of federal courts to review most claims in capital cases, the cases where innocent people are being exonerated every day — mostly innocent

Black men. What type of government do we live in when your elected officials would propose such a bill knowing that of the 5,826 death sentences imposed in the United States between 1973 and 1995, 68 percent were reversed or appealed?

The more things change the more they remain the same. A true story made into the movie "Remembering Rosewood" depicted the 1923 massacre of 120 residents in a predominantly Black town in Rosewood, Fla. The killing was sparked by a White woman who was beaten by her White lover; then she lied and said that a Black man allegedly raped her. Initially, four Black men were taken from

the prison and lynched by White men. And from there, they went on a killing spree and killed Black men, women and children. There were seven survivors of this massacre and all of the dead were innocent.

From slavery up to today, we have been convicted of a number of crimes for which we were not guilty. Post-conviction DNA testing is a very good tool and Innocence Projects all across the country are helping people get exonerated and bringing others to justice.

Maybe there is hope that the wheels of justice for African-Americans and other minorities will one day turn fairly and quickly.