

Obama's budget statement about priorities

By Ron Walters
Special to Sentinel-Voice

With lightening speed, President Barack Obama has moved from stimulus package to a home foreclosure package, to working on the financial bailout package, and now to the budget.

In his recent speech to Congress, he said something that most people who know anything about government agree with: the budget is not only about spending dollars and cents, it is a statement of priorities and, therefore, the most important policy document that reveals the direction he is taking the country.

The other packages were put together to handle the crises that President Obama was handed. But most close observers I have read mark his recently rolled out federal budget as the most fundamental shift in priorities since Ronald Reagan.

His \$3.6 trillion budget buttresses the direction of spending in the other three packages (the financial bail out yet to be presented) and it shows a \$1.7 trillion deficit for next year, most of which he inherited from the Bush administration.

This budget, however, contains a new emphasis in spending for health, education, energy and the environment and a push for job creation for the well-being of citizens in those sectors. That budget is a statement

about the change that the American people voted for, the change they need.

The press always asks, when it comes to social expenditures, a question seldom asked for military spending, for the rich, or for any other of the pet projects of presidents such as the Iraq War; "How will you pay for it?" Obama will pay for his budget by letting the tax cuts given to the top 1 percent of earners expire in 2010, thus raising their taxes after he believes the economy will have recovered. He will also pay for it by cutting the budget of programs that don't work or are not needed, like some weapon systems.

Passing this budget will not be easy because of something I have said before about his election. President Obama was elected by a coalition that was 60 percent White and 40 percent non-White, a coalition that does not reflect the power structure of this country.

The power structure in neither the House nor the Senate reflects Obama's winning coalition. The power of the lobbyists arrayed against spending proposals for human needs does not reflect Obama's winning coalition. The power of the private sector does not re-



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fects Obama's winning coalition where foundations, corporations and civic institutions weigh in on policy battles. He faces a serious overhang of conservative power in the media.

What this means is that we may be able to count on the 43 percent of Whites who voted for Obama. But unless the 40 percent of non-Whites

gets busy, where the need for government sponsored human services is most manifest, the president's budget is likely to come out of the political process looking something like the 55 percent of Whites who voted for John McCain and who dominate the major political, economic and social institutions of the country.

How can the overhand of conservative power be confronted? For those of you who watched Tavis Smiley's "State of the Black Union" on C-Span television recently, you could not escape the speakers' dominant theme of holding the government accountable. The missing element was how this was to be done and the clear implication was it could be done by individual citizens taking responsibility.

Let me depart from that answer and sug-

gest instead that the most powerful method of achieving accountability is through the organized power of individuals.

The Congressional Black Caucus went to meet with President Obama recently, but I have not seen anything about the result of that meeting.

Some organizations such as Delta Sigma Theta came to Washington, D.C. for their Annual Delta Days on Capitol Hill to talk to members of Congress and seek accountability, and the National Urban League is in intimate touch with the administration about job training and other urgent priorities.

But where do you come in? A task force of citizens needs to be created in every locality to track the flow of financial resources into the states and especially into their communities and that demands to participate in the decisions about how those resources are to be used.

They must do the research, engage elected officials, attend the meetings, and show out if necessary, to bring attention to urgent community needs. "Getting busy" this way should get the change we need.

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Overpolicing our schools concerning problem

By Marian Wright Edelman
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Imagine being four years old and put into handcuffs because you and your friend wouldn't take a nap in your pre-K class. Or being five years old, handcuffed, and taken away from your school by ambulance to a hospital psychiatric ward after throwing a tantrum in the kindergarten room. These scenarios might sound far-fetched, but both are true stories that captured the local media's attention after they happened to children at their New York City public schools. The overpolicing of public schools — not just in New York, but around the country — is one more threat to our nation's children at risk of entering the pipeline to prison.

In New York, the expanded police presence started becoming especially obvious about ten years ago when the New York Police Department (NYPD) took control over school safety from the Board of Education. By the start of the 2005-06 school year, the

NYPD employed 4,625 School Safety Agents in New York City schools — more personnel than there are officers in the police forces of Washington, D.C., Detroit, Boston or Las Vegas, according to the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) report, Criminalizing the Classroom: The Over-Policing of New York City Schools. In

addition to increasing the numbers of these school safety agents, who are unarmed but can make arrests, the city also launched the Impact Schools Initiative, in which armed police officers have been deployed in the city's "most dangerous" schools. Modeled after the NYPD's Operation Impact program for fighting street crime, the initiative is designed to flood those schools with armed officers and surveillance cameras. Over the last five years, a total of 28 schools have been designated as



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"impact schools."

A June 2005 report by the Drum Major Institute found that impact schools were among the most overcrowded and underfunded in the city and serve a student body that is disproportionately poor, Black and over-age for their grade.

Another report by Fordham University found that targeting a school as an impact school led to a significant decline in attendance there. This is exactly the opposite of what schools serving poor, at-risk youths should want to happen. But since the NYPD takeover of school security, many students and teachers have said that their schools feel more like prisons than places of learning.

One English teacher described the scene this way in the NYCLU report: "On this random Wednesday morning, scanners were set up in the cafeteria of the public high school in the South Bronx where I work. Students' bags were placed on a scanner, they were forced to walk through metal detectors, and any item deemed inappropriate for school — including food, keys and spare change — were taken away. Many students were patted down, some even with their hands on a police car.

An overwhelming ratio of adults to students made the cafeteria seem a lot like a police station... [C]an we please not treat already-struggling, inner city teenagers who have gotten themselves to school like they've committed a crime?"

In some ways, the sense that too many schools are turning into prisons is very real. Students are learning that many school disciplinary incidents, including the kind that used to end with a trip to the principal's office, can now lead to an arrest. The NYCLU

recently filed a Freedom of Information Act request in order to obtain police arrest data, and learned that the NYPD has illegally arrested over 300 students under age 16 for non-criminal violations such as loitering and disorderly conduct. Under state law, children younger than 16 can only be taken into custody without a warrant if they have committed a crime, not a violation. But the incidents mentioned earlier about the four-year-olds at a Bronx public school and the five-year-old Queens kindergartener only highlight how soon children can be at risk of over-policing in schools.

In response to the excesses of school policing in New York City, the NYCLU has convened a Student Safety Coalition to address the school-to-prison pipeline in that city and promote solutions. Children's Defense Fund New York is an active member of this coalition and is working with others to promote positive approaches to school safety and discipline.

We are also collaborating with the NYCLU and a group of other organizations on the School to Prison Pipeline Mapping for Action Project, whose goal is to map out current policies that push children out of school and into the juvenile justice and adult criminal justice system, so that changes can be made to stop them.

It's an important step, and the problem certainly doesn't begin or end with New York City. At-risk schools in New York and across the country deserve to be flooded with resources and support instead of police. And students at those schools need to be applauded and encouraged for being at school and wanting to learn, not made to feel as if they are criminals just for trying to go to class. It is time to treat children as children and not as criminals — especially at very early ages.

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ket share in our communities.

The third opponent is the Poverty Industrial Complex. This group prospers from receiving government funding to nurse and baby sit the unemployed or those living in poverty.

They, too, do not want to see success with the Stimulus Bill as it will cut into their base for poverty pimping. Finally, there is the Prison Industrial Complex which feeds off the previous three.

They want these young adults in jail and then going back to jail once they are released. They make money from criminal behavior and lopsided justice. A productive, working Black population is their worst nightmare.

We will structure strategic plans for each

committee and report monthly. Our progress will be posted on our website. It is our prayer to change the culture of African-Americans. This will only happen when we decide to take charge and do it for ourselves.

No one else is going to do it and no one being paid by others has the ability to make change. It won't be easy and those four obstacles will fight back very hard. But we have God on our side and this time we won't wait on others to do something they cannot possibly do or have never done.

It's on us to seize the moment. Look in the mirror and you will find part of the solution. Yes we can!

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