

NEWLY ELECTED COMMISSIONERS RESIST STATE TAKEOVER (BENTON HARBOR)



By Andrea Muhammad
Updated Mar 24, 2010 - 2:14:45 PM



[What's your opinion on this article?](#)

Insults and accusations fly as contentious political showdown becomes personal

BENTON HARBOR, Mich. (FinalCall.com) - As the state of Michigan is caught in the throes of what may prove to be America's greatest economic downturn, some say efforts are underway to strip away the rights of struggling municipalities to seize what few assets they may have.

Recently, in the city of Benton Harbor, Mayor Wilce Cooke, Commissioners Marcus Muhammad and Duane L. Seats II, were singled out by Marcus Robinson, president of Consortium for Community Development, a component of Cornerstone Alliance with ties to the Whirlpool Corporation. Mr.

Muhammad and Mr. Seats have been very vocal in speaking out against the proposed government takeover of Benton Harbor by placing the city into receivership.

It was reported in the Herald Palladium—the largest circulating local newspaper, in—that Mr. Robinson attacked the mayor and commissioners for their opposition to the proposed state takeover referring to it as a “coup d’etat.” Mr. Robinson also accused Mr. Muhammad of “standing on the shoulders of his Nation of Islam heritage.” Mr. Robinson went on to allege that Mr. Muhammad's rhetoric bordered on “incitement of civil disturbance” and classified them as “calculated statements to incite.”

During a recent city commission meeting, Commissioners Muhammad and Seats addressed Mr. Robinson and The Herald Palladium's reporting related to the matter. “There has been outrage from the community concerning Mr. Robinson's choice of



Commissioners Marcus Muhammad, left, and Duane L. Seats II oppose takeover of Benton Harbor, Mich. *Photos: Andrea Muhammad*

words as well as the culpability of the Herald Palladium.” Mr. Muhammad said, citing the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights concerning free speech and freedom of religion. “One judge said it looked like defamation of character and even slander to accuse somebody of trying to incite a riot or civil disturbance.”

Since his inflammatory outburst, Dr. Robinson has written an open letter of regret, which appeared in the Herald Palladium regarding his choice of words, however, he has not apologized to Mr. Muhammad for making the offensive statement.

Mr. Muhammad and Mr. Seats were both elected to the Benton Harbor City Commission in November, 2009. They have been in office less than three months, but have already renewed hope in this blighted part of southwest Michigan. The two candidates received the most votes during the election. Mr. Muhammad and Mr. Seats made no secret about their friendship and their desire to show the highest level of unity in order to accomplish what is best for the residents of Benton Harbor, regardless of the different religious backgrounds. Mr. Seats is a Christian and Mr. Muhammad a Muslim.

Many community leaders, as well as Mayor Cooke, said the two represented a refreshing, uncompromising new brand of leadership capable of leading Benton Harbor through the tough challenges that lie ahead.

In a letter condemning the false allegations in the Robinson interview, Benton Harbor NAACP president Edward Pinkney asked Whirlpool president/CEO Jeff Fettig, “If his (Mr. Robinson's) words reflect your company or if you wish to distance Whirlpool Corporation from those statements?” Attempting to distance itself from Robinson's comments, Whirlpool's Corporate Vice President of Communications and Public Affairs, D. Jeffrey Noel responded, “Please note that Marcus Robinson is not a representative of Whirlpool Corporation and, as such, does not speak on behalf of the company.”

Whirlpool is the major corporation in Benton Harbor, less than one percent of the people that work for Whirlpool are from Benton Harbor which is approximately 94 percent Black. While Benton Harbor's unemployment rate hovers between 20-30 percent, the rate for Black people in Benton Harbor is upwards of 60 percent, according to community leaders.

Benton Harbor faces an estimated \$4.1 million deficit, according to city officials.

According to an Associated Press report, Mr. Fettig's compensation package went up 77 percent to \$10.8 million in 2009 which includes his base salary, cash performance bonuses and stock.

Mr. Pinkney received national attention in 2009 after being charged with threatening a judge and violating terms of probation. He was subsequently arrested and imprisoned. The Hon. Minister Louis Farrakhan came to Benton Harbor in a show of support and solidarity with Mr. Pinkney on numerous occasions and followed the legal proceedings as well.

Speaking of the attacks against Commissioners Muhammad, Seats, and the negative statement regarding Min. Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam's influence, Mayor Cooke is undeterred. He told The Final Call he plans to invite Minister Farrakhan back to Benton Harbor to address the city council at which time he plans to present the Minister with a key to the city thereby making him an honorary citizen.

Michigan in crisis

Currently, the state of Michigan leads the U.S. in unemployment at a rate of 14.3 percent. The recent decline of the once powerful automotive industry, the flight of its manufacturing base overseas and declining property values have the state facing a mounting deficit. Given Michigan's economic condition, many of its cities have become vulnerable to the threat of receivership.

In fact, during Gov. Jennifer Granholm's tenure, at least 13 cities are either labeled as having financial emergencies or have been placed into receivership.

According to an article found on the Michigan State University Library's Red Tape Blog, "Twelve of the financially troubled cities are in Wayne County home of the state's largest city Detroit."

What's even more disconcerting is that a majority of the residents of those cities are Black. While the city of Detroit itself has not been identified in a financial emergency, the Detroit Public Schools have.

In an order recently issued by Gov. Granholm, the Detroit Public Schools have been placed under the control of financial manager Robert C. Bobb. He has begun the process of selling off the district's assets and outsourcing services to private entities. Mr. Bobb is now seeking to expand his powers to include control over the district's academics as well. A move that has called into question his and the governor's financial motives.

Marian Kramer, of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, discovered that once placed into receivership, financial stability is not always achieved. Case in point, the city of Highland Park. Kramer writes, "The state takeover of our city meant taking away the vote for the folks to elect their city officials. It meant the selling off of all of our different assets without the people's consent. It meant the city council no longer had a decision making role." She further pointed out that private contractors would be the real beneficiaries from the takeover through outsourcing. When attempts to privatize the city's water department failed, Ms. Kramer noted, "They were going to privatize the management of the water with 80 percent of the profits going to the management company and 20 percent to the city. It meant that the citizens of Highland Park would be responsible for any financial needs for fixing equipment, etc., not the management, although they were making 80 percent of the profits."

Mayor Cooke stated, "With the state's past record of Highland Park, Pontiac and now the Detroit Public Schools, I don't think it would be good for the city of Benton Harbor." He also shared, "The city of Benton Harbor has mostly assets in this end of the state and everyone wants it and they're trying to take it by whatever means necessary." Assets like the water treatment plant, airport, lake and riverfront property would likely be sold off to private entities should the city go into receivership.

Rev. Pinkney agreed, adding, "What they (corporations) normally do is come in and threaten to leave our community if we don't submit and give them tax breaks." Tax breaks the city cannot afford, he said. "They come in and ask for million dollar tax breaks and that's partially the reason why we're in this compromising position today."

As a result, Benton Harbor faces a worsening financial outlook that has paved the way for Gov. Granholm to appoint a financial manager to oversee the city. Some consider this a prelude to receivership.

Rev. Pinkney said, "One of the reasons why they have decided to put the city of Benton Harbor into receivership is that now, we're finally in a position where our elected officials favor the citizens." Something community leaders have been striving to achieve for last 10 to 15 years, he said.

Additionally, Mayor Cooke offered, "I don't believe that the government read the reports of the review board. I think she's (Gov. Granholm) relying on others to give her the information. We know that there are members of the community who have the governor's ear and are feeding her a lot of misinformation, erroneous information about the city." Mayor Cooke says his city is going to appeal the decision to send a financial manager based the findings listed in the review board's report.

According to City Manager Ronald Carter, Jr., the city submitted an application for a fiscal stabilization bond, which if granted Mr. Carter says, "The city would be out of debt tomorrow." At *Final Call* press time, Mr. Carter says he has not received acknowledgment from the state of having received the application. "All of this is very curious."

Despite the threat of a state takeover and media attempts to malign them, city and community leaders remain united and pledge to fight to preserve citizens of Benton Harbor's right to self govern. Referencing Minister Farrakhan's words during his 2010 Saviours' Day keynote address, Mr. Muhammad said, "We as leaders must stand up for what is right and fight for justice on behalf of the people."

FCN is a distributor (and not a publisher) of content supplied by third parties. Original content supplied by FCN and FinalCall.com News is Copyright 2009 FCN Publishing, FinalCall.com. Content supplied by third parties are the property of their respective owner,