

#57
3/24/2005



Memorandum

TO: Mayor and City Council Members
FROM: Toby Hammett Futrell, City Manager
DATE: March 24, 2005
SUBJECT: Transmittal of *African American Quality of Life Scorecard*

Over the past two years, Austin has begun a major recovery from one of the worst economic downturns in recent history. That recovery extended beyond a financial recovery. We once again began to receive national accolades as one of the best places to live, work, play, to start a business or retire. We were recognized as one of the top places in the country for Hispanics to live. Our Parks system was recognized as the best in the country. It seemed clear that our recovery included a renewed recognition of the quality of life that attracts and keeps people in Austin.

At that same time, a different sentiment was growing in our African American community. We experienced a series of serious incidents that raised community concerns about race relations and eroded trust with our African American population. In ensuing community discussions, a contradictory picture of Austin began to emerge. It was clear that African Americans were describing a different quality of life experience in our city.

I was troubled about this marked contrast in how our community was being viewed. To get a better handle on the situation, I initiated a study to try to answer two basic questions:

- Is the quality of life in Austin for African Americans different than that of other Austinites?
- Is the quality of life in Austin markedly different for African Americans than the quality of life African Americans experience in other cities?

To answer these questions, we created a scorecard and looked at 10 indicators, both direct and indirect measures of quality of life. These measures are commonly used to evaluate quality of life and include:

- Family Income
- Educational Attainment

- Home Ownership
- Poverty
- Unemployment
- Business Ownership
- Ethnicity Shares
- Housing Patterns
- Incarceration Rates
- Social and Cultural Infrastructure

As we began reviewing the data for this quality of life scorecard, several important findings began to emerge. One specific concern raised was that Austin lacks the kind of social and cultural infrastructure for African Americans that create a sense of belonging. In other words, there is no critical mass of African American business ownership, as well as any vital art or entertainment scene for middle class singles and couples.

As we were pulling together the final report, Midtown burned to the ground. This nightclub, located in the heart of northeast Austin, represented one of the very few African American music venues in our community. In the context of the scorecard information, the Midtown loss was cause for significant concern. It was this backdrop that caused us to recommend a loan program for the restoration of Midtown and the neighborhood jobs it created.

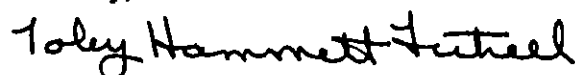
Unfortunately, the Midtown fire was also the very public target of inappropriate comments made by some officers performing peripheral traffic control the night of the fire, as well as some civilian communication staff. That incident polarized and refocused the public discussion around two primary issues: (1) The ongoing debate about race relations and our police department (2) Economic incentives in general, and whether the City should invest tax payer money in private businesses.

The level of public opposition in the past two weeks has made it clear that the original context for the proposed loan to Midtown - to help preserve one of the few remaining African American entertainment venues in Austin - was overshadowed by the sequence of events.

But the facts remain the same. We have some work to do in Austin to ensure that our unique quality of life is enjoyed by all.

I believe the presentation of the *African American Quality of Life Scorecard* will help advance this discussion so that we can come back to Council in 60 days with community feedback and a recommendation for incorporating key strategies in the City's overall economic development program.

Sincerely,



Toby Hammett Futrell
City Manager