

# Reserved for the Mayor: Human Rights as a Vision for the Future of our Cities

By Birmingham Mayor William A. Bell, Sr.

The 2015 Presidential debates offer a politically charged, but important snapshot of the national agenda. From aging infrastructure and changing demographics to rising healthcare costs and stagnant wages, the dominant issues are the same concerns that we address in our cities every day. Birmingham is no exception.

To respond to these challenges, and stay ahead of the curve, we balance our day-to-day work of city management with a longer-term view on city sustainability. We strive to think not only about what our community needs next year, but also in the next generation.

Of course, to look forward, we must examine where we are. And, as a nation, we face mounting social and economic inequality. As we know in Birmingham, the challenge of inequality is not new. During the Civil Rights Movement, our residents mobilized and inspired change, laying the groundwork to protect the basic civil and human rights of dignity and equality across the country and around the world.

As we continually strive to achieve the goals of dignity and equality, fundamental human rights principles remain an important touchstone. The basic premise that there is a right to be free from discrimination, and that governments should take steps to realize this right, and create conditions where all individual can meet their basic needs, informs what we do on a daily basis. Human rights provide us with a positive vision that can help our city shape effective solutions calibrated to ensure dignity, opportunity, and fairness for all.

These principles are important as we strive to make Birmingham more livable today and more resilient for tomorrow. They counsel us to look at the relationship among a range of human rights issues within our community. This includes access to the ballot, as well as housing, criminal justice, education, and health. Human rights also call on us to proactively examine how laws and policies can

perpetuate discrimination and inequality, even if that is not their intent. Indeed, we cannot tackle inequality without understanding the factors that contribute to it, and working intentionally to eliminate them.

Our initiatives to address disparities and discrimination reflect human rights principles in a number of ways. We have sought out challenge grants to improve housing and access to food. We are focused on access to quality education for all, as well as the causes and consequences of disparities in the criminal justice system. In all of these efforts to protect basic human rights, we have placed a premium on partnerships. We seize opportunities to partner with community members, with mayors, with businesses, and with thought leaders from around the world.

Human rights offer an important tool and shared framework to make these connections. Challenges like human trafficking, immigrant integration, equitable access to food, health outcomes, and the environment transcend local and national boundaries. To effectively address them, we should think in global terms. Over the past several years, we have witnessed how human rights can help build bridges to confront some of the pressing human rights issues we face in Birmingham.

In 2014, I was invited by the federal government to join an official U.S. delegation to the United Nations. The delegation traveled to Geneva as part of a periodic U.N. review of how U.S. laws and policies measure up to the human rights standards set forth in the international agreement focused on racial discrimination (also known as CERD). Over the span of a few days, I consulted with the federal government representatives, international human rights experts, and U.S. human rights advocates.

The review was an opportunity for me to showcase Birmingham's efforts to protect human rights, as well as USCM initiatives to tackle discrimination and inequality, like the Coalition of Cities Against Racism. Importantly,



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tantly, this trip to Geneva was also a chance to foster relationships with policymakers and advocates from around the U.S., and the world, to learn about common challenges, and common solutions. Grounding the conversation in human rights terms helped to focus discussions on the importance of proactive efforts to achieve equal access and outcomes, and address the unique barriers that different individuals experience as a result of their identity.

My participation in these international dialogues inspired me to involve the Birmingham community in a conversation about human rights – to reflect on our own human rights record and identify avenues for further progress. In March of this year, we took a first step. My office convened a daylong dialogue among community members, local and national advocates, as well as federal and local government representatives, to discuss the status of human rights in the City. The Dialogue occurred at an important time for reflection. It took place on the eve of the 50th Anniversary of the Bloody Sunday March from Selma to Montgomery that precipitated passage of the Voting Rights Act. It also coincided with a comprehensive U.N. review of the U.S. human rights record, known as the Universal Periodic Review.

We hosted a full day of panels focused on

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Director of the Institute of Politics. Cochran told the new mayors that the Conference of Mayors was there to serve them; and that they will play an important role in helping to form the administration of the next President.

Mayors who also served as faculty members were: Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley and Austin Mayor Steve Adler, who served as panelists on the transitioning session; Columbia, SC Mayor Steve Benjamin, who helped the discussion on budgeting and finance; Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer, who was a panelist on the jobs and economic development session; South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg, West Sacramento Mayor Christopher Cabaldon, and Lexington Mayor Jim Gray, who served as panelists for attracting the millennial generation to cities; Gary Mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson, Houston Mayor Annise Parker and Boston Mayor Martin Walsh, who served as panelists for the session on policing and public safety; Tuscaloosa Mayor Walter Maddox, who helped lead the discussion on responding to natural disasters; Rochester Hills Mayor Bryan Barnett, who was a panelist on the social media session, and Providence Mayor Jorge Elorza, who was a panelist on the tech and data driven city session.

Ben Sosenko, press secretary to Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson also participated in the traditional and social media session.

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the House forcing the bill to the floor, where it passed by wide margin. Eventually the reauthorization was attached to the transportation bill.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors strongly supported reauthorization of the Bank, sending a letter of support signed by over 100 mayors to the Hill. The next hurdle is to reach Senate confirmation on the Board members for the Bank. Currently, the bank's board has only two members, but needs three to conduct business. Hochberg will address the Ports and Exports Task Force, chaired by Little Rock Mayor Mark Stodola, at the 84th Winter Meeting of the Conference of Mayors, January 20-22, 2015 in Washington, D.C.

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way transit projects is now capped at 60 percent funding share (although other federal transit/highway program funds can continue to be used to raise the federal share to 80 percent).

On the policy front, considerable attention has been given to provisions designed to accelerate the completion of projects, known as project streamlining, but there are also other changes to ensure that "urban street design" principles are incorporated into state design standards for federal projects and that the U.S. Department of Transportation exerts more leadership in advancing "complete streets" policies at the local and state levels.

The new law also affirms the longstanding practice that local elected officials can serve as representatives of local transit agencies on the governing boards of their metropolitan planning organizations or MPOs. For months now, FTA had been considering a new rule, based on its interpretation of provisions in MAP-21, that might reinterpret the role of local elected officials in this regard. The FAST Act overturns these MAP-21 provisions and reaffirms current practices, allowing local elected officials to continue to serve as representatives of local transit agencies on MPO boards.

Among existing programs, the Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (TIFIA) Program was targeted for the largest funding reduction, with the new law providing only \$1.4 billion over the next five years. Adjustments to loan amounts and funding eligibilities, including qualifying certain transportation infrastructure projects in and around ports, were made as well.

For the first time, the new law does include a substantial Rail Title in a major surface transportation authorization bill, authorizing Amtrak for the first time in seven years, including grants to Amtrak and states for infrastructure, safety, and state of good repair improvements. The law also includes a number of reforms to Amtrak's grant process and business lines and asset plans, among other provisions. When the FAST Act is renewed, renewal of Amtrak and intercity passenger rail investments will also be an integral part of that debate.

## HUMAN RIGHTS

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five human rights issues: criminal justice, education, immigration, homelessness & poverty, and marriage equality. The dialogue was a space for participants to discuss challenges, share their perspectives on successful local policies and programs, and identify strategies for improvement. Throughout the day, there was a focus on how communities and government actors can work together to ensure dignity, equality, and opportunity for Birmingham residents.

Events like this are an important foundation for responsive and participatory policy-making, in line with human rights standards. They offer an avenue to include community voices in decision-making and foster a more collaborative, transparent, and accountable approach to governance based on core human rights principles. Indeed, the conversations that took place will contribute to how we think about our policies moving forward.

There may be a bumpy road ahead. This is true in Alabama, where voting rights have been a hot button issue for years, as well as in our cities. However, we navigate this journey based on the belief that all members of the human family have inherent dignity and equal rights. And we look to civil and human rights leaders, like Martin Luther King Jr., who stated that "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

The idea that human rights start close to home drives our vision for the future. We will continue to work proactively to promote and protect fundamental human rights locally, nationally, and internationally. We hope you will join us.

*Editor's Note: The United Nations has designated December 10 International Human Rights Day. In 1948, the nations of the world came together in San Francisco to proclaim that every individual, no matter where he or she lives, has fundamental rights that deserve protection. Enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are, among others, the right to be free from racial discrimination, the right to think and write what you choose, and the right to fair working conditions.*