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Opa-locka residents get lessons on ethics

Commissioners hold class on good government

Andrea Robinson Nov 23, 2016



Miami Times photo/Andrea Robinson

A selected group of Opa-locka residents attended a day-long workshop on Saturday to help them learn about good government and their role in turning around the corruption-plagued city.

At a special citizens academy on good government, Opa-locka resident Dawn Mangham said she came because of concerns for her niece. “Opa-locka was safe. She doesn’t have that same sense of community.”

Another resident, Pamela Burnett, said she wanted to be more involved. “I don’t want to give up hope,” she said.

More than a dozen Opa-locka residents shared their hopes, dreams, frustrations and anger at the current state of their city, which is under a national microscope of debt and corruption charges. The erstwhile city manager David Chiverton on Monday was sentenced to three years in prison for his role in the thievery.

The county Commission on Ethics and Trust and former Commissioner Katy Sorenson held a day-long workshop on Saturday for a selected group of Opa-locka residents to help them learn about good government and their role in turning around the corruption-plagued city.

The day long Citizens Academy was the idea of Ethics Commission Executive Director Joseph Centorino, who brought in Sorenson, the creator of the Good Government Initiative, as the facilitator, and several civic leaders to speak with participants on their responsibilities as citizens, how and where to get involved, and even how to hold elected officials accountable.

The session was the second workshop in Opa-locka. This past summer, the Ethics Commission hosted eight high school students in a special internship program to expose the teenagers to local government and the Ethics Commission's mission.

In January, the commission will conduct ethics training for all city employees and elected officials.

The session was a dream of Centorino, who grew concerned after numerous headlines of corruption and financial failure in the 4.2-square-mile city earlier this year.

“Just because a community is poor doesn’t mean it should have that kind of government,” Centorino said.

Willie Logan, a former mayor and now chairman of the Opa-locka Community Development Corp., challenged the group to take action to change their government. He reminded them of an aborted recall effort against Mayor Myra Taylor in late 2015.

Logan told them not to wait for federal agencies to take action.

“You want her gone? Move her,” he said, adding they should get signatures needed for a recall drive.

J.D. Patterson, former Miami-Dade Police Commissioner and vice-chair of the state Oversight Commission, described his current role as “looking at a political system that’s fueled as if it’s not for anyone but itself.”

“I believe this is a wealthy city. The problem is people are overstepping their roles,” Patterson said.

Sorenson, introducing new City Commissioner Matthew Pigatt, told the group to think of themselves as more than citizens.

“I want you to see yourselves as leaders,” Sorenson said. “Matthew was one of the first bright spots in the election.

Pigatt said while growing up he was more interested in hustling to make money. Politics was not on his radar, until he joined a mentoring program sponsored by the 100 Black Men of South Florida. That tutelage led him to Morehouse College in Atlanta. He met young Black men who were sons and grandsons of national businessmen and political leaders. That steered him for the street hustle to activism and engagement.

“I found I wanted to be engaged in my community,” Pigatt said. But it was the untimely death earlier this year of Terence Pinder that forced Pigatt to realize he could do more. “That’s not the city I want to live in,” he said.

The residents applauded Pigatt on his recent election, but Pamela Burnett and others warned they would keep their eyes on him.

“We’re not taking any more mess from Opa-locka,” Burnett said. “More people voted in this election than any other. We don’t want lip service. We want a change here.”

Said Pigatt: “I want you to hold me accountable. I need the assistance of everyone in this room.”

Veronica Williams, a Miami-Dade schools administrator, agreed with Pigatt.

“We created a Myra Taylor and allowed a Luis Santiago to be created in our community,” Williams said. “How do we fix the problem? By coming together as a community to come up with strategies in the community.”

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