

# Blurred 'Vision'

Despite big win, opponents couldn't see the future

Amid the smashing win of Vision 2025 last week, there were some disappointments.

The four measures each were approved by at least 60 percent of nearly 129,000 voters. But civic leaders had to pony up more than \$700,000 to promote the program and persuade voters to approve a 1 percent increase in the county sales tax.

That suggests that much money or more will be needed any time the city or county needs civic improvements. It takes that much to overcome about 50,000 citizens who will vote against almost anything.

The vote in various sections of the county bears this out; where there was a heavy turnout, the measures passed. But where there was a light or moderate turnout, the measures failed.

Rejection in the predominantly black sections of North Tulsa was disappointing, if not ominous.

There was \$14 million in the program for Morton Health Center; there was \$4 million for the Jazz Hall of Fame; there was \$8 million for Langston University; there was \$30 million for Oklahoma State University, located in the heart of north Tulsa; there was \$4 million for widening 36th Street North in the area.

All this was in addition to \$183 million to rework the existing civic center and build a new 18,000-seat events center adjacent to north Tulsa; a facility that will attract conventions that mean jobs in hotels, restaurants and businesses all over the city. Still, black citizens voted no.

Why? Maybe it was old-fashioned politics. The program was pushed by Mayor Bill LaFortune and County Commissioner Bob Dick, both Republicans. But the highly respected Democrat on the County Commission is Wilbert Collins, a black man. The more serious interpretation is that black-white relations in Tulsa are so bad that unhappy blacks are voting their unhappiness.

That unhappiness is well founded, but it is discouraging that a program that has so much in it for the black community was rejected by blacks.

Also discouraging is the lack of performance by the Democrat and Republican parties. It not only is disappointing, it demonstrates how little attention anyone pays to the political parties today.

Imagine political "leaders" who wouldn't even express their personal approval of a massive civic improvement program, if indeed they did approve of it.

U.S. Sen. Jim Inhofe, a former Tulsa mayor, worked behind the scenes to torpedo Vision 2025. His political crony, Ron Howell, once a trusted LaFortune administration adviser, turned on the mayor and opposed the program.

Inhofe and Howell had earlier teamed to launch a federal investigation into the Airport Authority, with which they had earlier grievances. Remember, Mayor Inhofe devised the highly successful capital expenditures program in 1980, one that



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Tulsans have extended for five-year periods since. When Inhofe was mayor, he was for a city tax for capital improvement, but not now, apparently.

Even televangelist Richard Roberts, whose ministry has taken millions out of Tulsans and whose organization enjoys a wide range of tax exemptions, was preaching against the measure in Oral Roberts University meetings. Roberts is reportedly miffed because a drainage project he wants for ORU was left out of the Vision 2025 package.

The opposition of these public figures is exceptionally discouraging, as well as that of a lesser light, County Commissioner Randi Miller who is still struggling to learn what a county commissioner does.

Contrast the dog-in-the-manger performance of these folks with that of former governor, U.S. senator and current University of Oklahoma President David Boren. Boren quickly and repeatedly came to Tulsa to campaign for the package, understanding better than most what money for higher education means to the future of Tulsa.

In addition, Boren has worked hard as a member of the American Airlines board of directors to help American state off Chapter 11 and add jobs to the AA base here.

It makes you wonder how Inhofe, Roberts, Miller, et al, rationalize their opposition. Are they against American? New jobs? Higher education? More likely, they all are playing petty political games, their opposition based more on personality snits than rational thought.

For hope and consolation, we turn once again to the Oklahoma City experience. When leaders there first proposed the widely acclaimed MAPS program, voters barely approved the measure.

When city leaders confessed they needed more money to deliver the projects promised, voters said yes in a landslide. In fact, Oklahoma City voters in 2001 voted for \$695 million to be spent on the city schools.

Let's see that the Vision 2025 projects are done quickly and efficiently; let's see public money at work. Already, American is responding by announcing new jobs and more will come. Nearly \$30 million has already been promised by private contributors based on the favorable Vision 2025 vote.

The big margin of victory for progressive leaders and citizens has already provided a psychological boost for Tulsa.

Instead of a city dead in the water, it is a city with promise and hope. But it is dismaying that a significant number of elected officials and community leaders refused to endorse the hard work of the people who fought and won Vision 2025.

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JOHN CLANTON/Tulsa World

Mayor Bill LaFortune on election night.

# Sunday Editorial



## Let's have 'reserve' congressmen

Reading the transcript and listening to some of the sound bites from the Sept. 8 arguments before the Supreme Court over the McCain-Feingold campaign finance law again reminds that the real issue isn't about us but them; about the career politicians and not "we the people"; about perpetuating themselves in office, not doing the people's business.

I happen to be on the side of those, including Kenneth Starr and First Amendment expert Floyd Abrams, who argued that people should be able to contribute whatever they want to whomever they wish in the pursuit of their political objectives. So long as those gifts are made public, voters can decide for themselves who is exercising influence over whom and vote accordingly. The idea that politicians who are unscrupulous will somehow become more virtuous if their campaign contributions are restricted is ridiculous. If politicians are corrupted by contributions above a certain level, perhaps their "price" should be listed in the congressional directory along with their college degrees, name of spouse and religious preference. Senator Glut is honest for amounts under \$250,000. Congressman Greed can't be had for sums under \$100,000. Put them on TV and call it "The Political Price Is Right."

The court should decide this issue on free speech grounds. If right-to-life groups and labor unions wish to solicit funds from members for the purpose of advancing their beliefs and political agenda, and spend whatever amount they choose on getting candidates who subscribe to their views elected, nothing should stop them.



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Group members, whether Republican or Democrat, should be free to opt out of political causes (and to keep a portion of their dues or membership fees) if they disagree with the organization's leadership. This was supposed to have happened with labor unions, not all of whose members agree with the ultra-liberal agenda many of their leaders pursue, but practically that is not always the case.

Political contributions to activist groups are sometimes the only way a person can make his or her voice heard. This demonstration of individual free speech through a larger bullhorn shouldn't be abridged by Congress or the Supreme Court. Not owning a printing press or a television station or network, what is an individual supposed to do in order to be heard above those who have such access?

But there is a greater issue than the amount of campaign contributions. It is that too many members of Congress have become careerists. The term-limits movement, which flourished a decade ago, now seems dormant, at least in the public's mind. The Founders never intended to create a class of career politicians. If members of Congress served for only a limited time, the power of money over those who are unable to resist temptation would be greatly diminished. Every mem-

ber — especially every House member — knows that nonstop fund-raising is the greatest burden they carry. From the day they are sworn in (and in some cases even before that) members are on a non-stop mission to raise money for reelection. Election and reelection, not the people's business, are the primary concern of most members of Congress.

Perhaps "we the people" should reform Congress for its sake and ours. How about emulating the military, which has a sizable number of reservists? Instead of career politicians, why not establish "reserve" congressmen and senators, who would be called upon to legislate when needed and allowed to pursue real careers when not needed? Fewer politicians spending less time in Washington would mean less mischief, lower government costs and more opportunity for the truly talented and dedicated to serve. Instead of being preoccupied with themselves, reserve congresspersons would be preoccupied with and closer to their constituents. They would be more likely to legislate properly because the incentive would not be self-preservation and self-perpetuation, but doing their jobs well so they can get home to their real lives and families.

Some years ago during a previous presidential campaign, Lamar Alexander had a great slogan about Congress: "Cut their pay and send them home." A reserve Congress might have the same effect. It probably won't happen since Congress would have to vote on it. But it might if people get fed up enough.

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## Sharpton shows take-control leadership quality

WASHINGTON — Early preprimary debates, especially those where the stage is overstuffed with candidates, are notoriously poor gauges of the strength of rival contenders.

President Bush was anything but a dominant figure when he was one of six Republican aspirants in New Hampshire in December 1999. Baited by Gary Bauer and Steve Forbes on his alleged squishiness on abortion and taxes, he appeared to be on autopilot. Rarely did he command the debate scene as he came to control the nomination race.

So one should not draw too many conclusions from the performance of the nine Democrats who met in Baltimore last week.

But there was one thing I found revealing about their performance, and it had nothing to do with the way they dealt with Iraq, Israel, the economy, health care — or each other.

I was riveted by their reactions when backers of Lyndon LaRouche, the leader of a fringe political faction and chronic candidate for the Democratic nomination, repeatedly interrupted proceedings at the Congressional Black Caucus debate with loud complaints about his exclusion.

The only candidate who knew how to deal with this unprogrammed event — the only one who figured out how to profit from it — was, believe it or not, Al Sharpton.

That doesn't erase the many liabilities he brings into the contest, but it does show he has a quality people crave in a president — the ability to take charge of a situation. Democrats must wonder how to graft that leadership gene onto the oth-



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ers.

The first time the shouting broke out, Sen. Bob Graham of Florida was speaking. He froze. So did almost all his rivals. Sharpton was the first person to find his voice. He told the hecklers, "Now, you all don't get to the Black Caucus debate and start acting up now."

The second outburst — shouts of "Where is LaRouche?" — came when Sen. Joe Lieberman of Connecticut was answering a question. He just stood there looking pained. Former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean was quick-witted enough to comment, "I suspect he's in jail," where LaRouche had been on mail fraud charges. But again it was left to Sharpton to admonish the noisemakers.

Addressing the moderator, Fox News' Brit Hume, Sharpton said, "Brit, can we appeal to people? I mean, this is a historic night, the first time the Congressional Black Caucus had a debate. Would you all respect our right to be heard like we respected everybody else?"

A wave of applause signaled that most in the audience were glad somebody was taking charge.

Twice more, there were outbursts — once interrupting Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts and then Lieberman again.

All the victims turned to Sharpton for help. In stern tones, he told the offending members of the audience that the candidates would not "tolerate the continual breakup of what we are trying to say here tonight to the American people. ... You've not done it at any other debate. You're not going to do it now. You're playing this phony liberal game, and you

wait until our night to start acting up. We don't appreciate it. I don't care who's not on this stage. You're going to respect us on this stage because we've got something to say."

A relieved Lieberman said, "Well, first, let me say to my dear friend, Reverend Sharpton, amen." Sharpton joshed that he would take that as an endorsement.

There were two more brief raucous episodes, but Sharpton clearly had shamed some of the troublemakers.

More important, he demonstrated to the whole political world what is lacking in the rest of the Democratic field — the spontaneity that marks a winner.

I had two flashbacks. One was to the presidential debate in 1976, when Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter stood like statues at their lecterns, afraid to move, to converse or even to smile, for the long minutes it took to repair the audio feed from the TV studio. That inability to deal with the unexpected shadowed both their presidencies.

The other memory was the 1980 debate in Nashua, N.H., where the first George Bush and Ronald Reagan were on stage when suddenly, four other Republican contenders (who had not been invited to participate) walked in. Bush simply froze. Reagan — who was part of the plot — welcomed them, and when the moderator tried to cut Reagan off, he delivered the line, "I paid for this microphone, Mr. Green."

He got the name wrong, but by taking command when his opponent was tongue-tied, he virtually ended the Bush challenge.

The take-command reflex is a mighty useful trait when you are hoping to run against the commander in chief. That Sharpton is the only Democrat to display it does not augur well for the party's chances.

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