

FORUM

A Changing Course Budget for Winston-Salem



Vernon Robinson
Guest Columnist

For some time a group of elites has contemptuously thumped their noses at the taxpayers of Winston-Salem. They have led a majority of the city's elected officials around on a leash.

This downtown crowd supported a bond referendum that was crushed at the polls by 3-1 and 4-1 margins and then successfully got the Board of Aldermen to use two-thirds bond money to fund those projects defeated at the polls regardless of voter sentiment.

They have used city-county organizations and the Board of County Commissioners to shift costs to Winston-Salem residents and tax revenue to the county. They supported a baseball tax that would have given the power of eminent domain to the county commissioners to seize people's homes, farms and other real property to build a baseball stadium for millionaire players and millionaire owners.

For too long these people have used the public treasury to finance their pet charities through hundreds of non-profits in Winston-Salem contribute greatly to our community without taxpayer subsidies.

The result of this spending spree is that Winston-Salem has the highest ratio of non-public safety city employees per 1,000 residents in the state, higher even than Greensboro and Durham. While per capita spending in Winston-Salem continues to rise, the per capita burden of government on the citizens in Charlotte and Raleigh continues to fall. It is past time to change course.

The Changing Course Budget that we propose has three goals. Eliminate wasteful and inappropriate spending, discharge the government's constitutional duties of public safety and road infrastructure, and lower the tax burden on families and other taxpayers.

The Changing Course Budget accomplishes this feat by cutting spending \$6.24 million; removing the proposed rain tax increase of \$850,000; cutting taxes on real, personal, utility, and vehicle property 10 percent or \$6.24 million dollars. The resulting Changing Course Budget total taxpayer savings is \$7.1 million.

The first step in changing course is the elimination of contingency slush funds that allow politicians to spend unbudgeted money without an amendment to the budget resolution. If you recall, the largest slush fund expenditure in the '98-'99 fiscal year was a gift to the Mexican National Special Olympics Team for "economic development" purposes. This money did not go to Hispanic-Americans or even resident aliens living in Winston-Salem. It went to guys from Mexico City. We don't need a slush fund to finance a foreign policy. Savings to the taxpayer: \$350,000.

The next step to change course is maintaining employee raises so that they do not exceed the rate of tax revenue increases. For some time, city employees have received pay raises of 4 percent annually while personal incomes in Forsyth County have increased at a fraction of that rate and the increase in tax revenues has lagged behind the pay increases by 50 to 100 percent. This ill-advised policy is structurally unsound and will force a tax increase in the future if it not stopped now. The Changing Course Budget offers a 2 percent pay increase for city workers. Savings to the taxpayer: \$917,000.

The third step is to return some of the revenue windfall to the taxpayers and spending the rest on critical road infrastructure. The "corporate welfare" budget proposed by the city manager spends all of the windfall.

Spending it all would now be proposed if two-thirds bond spending on projects rejected by the voters had not taken place. A more modest capital program emphasizing roads results in a savings to the taxpayer of \$1,350,000.

While the private sector has replaced huge middle management bureaucracies with people who manage themselves and computers that monitor systems, the taxpayers' wallet and purse have borne the brunt of the failure to achieve these savings in city government.

The level of assistant city manager is as relevant today as the horse and buggy. The Changing Course Budget eliminates a vacant position and eliminates the assistant city manager for corporate welfare, the lobbyist and their offices. Savings to the taxpayer: \$549,770.

The next step to changing course is to eliminate general fund subsidies to private corporations in the corporate welfare operation. The parking deck deal, where in exchange for \$500,000 annual lease payments the city was to get \$500,000 of property taxes, is a great example why the taxpayers get rolled in these deals. Instead of the estimated amount, the bank in question challenged the tax valuation of the building. Further, the city staff did not take into consideration depreciation and assumed that the property tax rate would stay constant for 20 years. Annual loss to the taxpayers on the parking deck deal: \$128,000. Savings to the taxpayers by ending corporate welfare with general fund revenue: \$855,000.

The city has \$5 million tied up in vacant positions. Eliminating some of the vacant non-public safety positions would result in an annual savings of \$750,000.

The city should not fund advocacy groups at all and should not use the power to seize people's property to pay taxes so that politicians can fund their favorite charities. For

example, Experiment in Self Reliance, received money earmarked to help the poor. Instead, the organization purchased a membership at the swanky private Piedmont Club. The Winston-Salem Journal suggested last year that rather than using this tax money to fund police office positions, it should be returned to the taxpayers. We agree. Savings to taxpayers by eliminating spending on political charities and advocacy groups: \$1,175,520.

Wachovia would get a \$33,000 tax cut on the white-domed headquarters building downtown alone. If Wachovia so chooses, it, rather than the taxpayers, can pay the \$25,000 the Downtown Development Corp. wants from the city. If Wachovia so chooses, it can give the remaining \$8,000 to left-of-center groups like the Council on the Status of Women and Forsyth County Common Vision, now funded, in part, by the city of Winston-Salem.

Our tax cut means one day of work less for oppressed homeowners. They can spend an hour each day for eight days reading to the elderly. Or they can mentor a child for an hour a week for two months at their child's school. Or they can work that day and give \$51 to the Arts Council. Whichever option homeowners choose, it will be real charity through voluntary association rather than political charity compelled by the tax system and the police power that backs up tax collection.

The Changing Course Budget gives taxpayers relief while performing the duty of government to provide public safety and road infrastructure. And it is high time in coming.

Vernon Robinson is alderman of the South Ward. Steve Whiton is alderman of the Southwest Ward. They are authors of the Changing Course City Budget.

The Chronicle's e-mail address is: wschron@netunlimited.net

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Robinson made a small college big



Marshall Bass
Guest Columnist

Dr. Prezell Russell Robinson is writing his memoirs, recounting his life for us. I am sure that is keyed around the quarter-century he spent as president of Saint Augustine's College in Raleigh, one of three historically black Episcopal colleges in the United States.

"Robbie," as his intimates call him, is a dear friend of mine. We are both Episcopalians and both of us served our country in the U.S. Army. We met just after my retirement from the Army more than 30 years ago. At the early point of my long second career in human resources, public and governmental affairs at RJR/Nabisco, I made linkages to HBCUs a central focus of our corporate accountabilities.

For the last seven years of Robinson's presidency at Saint Augustine's, I had the pleasure of serving as chairman of the board of trustees. It was during those years that I really came to know this extraordinary man up close, and I am pleased that through his memoirs, others too will come to appreciate this giant in our midst.

In a spiritual way Robinson's life is much like the namesake of the college for which he served as president. Saint Augustine of Algeria served as a pastor, teacher and judge to the people of North Africa during the third century. Later exalted as a saint, Augustine was not always a Catholic, just as Robinson has not always been an Episcopalian.

While my friend's self-account

won't likely reach the acclaim of Saint Augustine's "Confessions," the way he deflected the honor of historically black colleges at a critical time is of relative equal measure.

When he took the helm of the college in 1966, white colleges were recruiting the top black students and faculty. Money from foundations became scarce due in part to the racial tensions of those days, much of it spearheaded by black college students. In the midst of such uncertainties, Robinson led a \$35 million fundraising drive and met the goal five years ahead of schedule.

At the same time he, in effect, took the helm of all HBCUs when he was elected to head the United Negro College Fund as well as the networking agency representing public black colleges, the National Association for Equal Educational Opportunity.

Robbie was a staunch and articulate defender of HBCUs. He took a simple tact, saying matter-of-factly in 1968, "The predominantly black college has done more to ensure freedom and social justice for blacks than any other institution in this country....One day the American people will see that these little private black colleges are not academic wastelands."

In 1966 he was chosen as "one of the most effective college presidents." Ranked in the top five percent of more than 3,300 U.S. college presidents, Robinson was nominated multiple times by his peers to the Washington-Based Council for Advancement and Support of Education.

He stood tall in the international circles of higher education, having been selected as a Fulbright Scholar to India. The U.S. State Department designated him as a special education envoy to Nigeria, South Africa,

Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe in 1981. Because of his understanding of national and international issues both Presidents Bush and Clinton named him a delegate to the United Nations. On his watch, nearly 15 percent of the student body at Saint Augustine's hailed from the Bahamas, where he is still quite literally revered. He accepted more than a dozen honorary degrees from some of America's most prestigious colleges and universities.

Reflecting his commitment to education throughout his presidency, Robbie never turned an otherwise qualified student away from the college because of lack of financial means. He literally "beat the pavement" throughout this nation to raise funds for the well-being of the college. When he retired from his nearly four decades of association with Saint Augustine's in 1995, he left a legacy of solid financing; the endowment at that time was just less than \$219 million and the student body had grown from about 400 to just less than 1,800.

When a large portion of our nation was protesting the military establishment during the Vietnam War, Robbie's sense of patriotism brought to the campus a Reserve Officers' Training Corps, which has received national acclaim.

Also, the record will show that during his administration, nearly every building on the campus was either constructed or renovated. At the time of his retirement, a new men's residence hall was more than 50 percent completed. One of the new buildings constructed during his administration - the library - was named in his honor.

Today, Robbie is president emeritus of Saint Augustine's College and

the Mott Distinguished Professor of Social Sciences. When I mentioned to William Friday, the retired president of the University of North Carolina system, that Robinson was writing his memoirs, Friday said: "When one thinks of Saint Augustine's College, we think of Prezell Robinson. He served on the State Board of Higher Education and has served, this state notably. He has effectively represented our state at home and abroad. He is truly one of North Carolina's finest educators and citizens. It has been a joy to know this man. I look forward to reading his memoirs."

There is a bit of the spirit of Saint Augustine, in Robinson. He is a great Episcopalian, a remarkable college administrator and a great American. If it were left to me, I would encourage him to at least subtitle it "The Confessions of Saint Augustine's Greatest President."

But he is modest to a fault. I once heard him react to excessive praise by saying, "The recognition given me reflects something that is good at Saint Augustine's College. Personal recognition is OK. It has its place. But it becomes very elusive if one sets out to find it. I work and let the chips fall where they may." The chips from his forward-looking and cutting-edge philosophy and approach fell in good places. They fell in a big pile, affirming his professional motto: "Black colleges can make it and make it in a big way."

The author is president of Marshall B. Bass and Associates, a management consulting firm based in Winston-Salem. He retired from RJR/Nabisco in 1991 as an elected senior vice-president.

THE CHRONICLE

The Choice for African American News
USPS 067910
617 N. Liberty Street
Winston-Salem, NC 27101

The Chronicle was established by Ernest Pitt and Ndubisi Egemonye in 1974, and is published every Thursday by The Chronicle Publishing Co., Inc.

The Chronicle is a proud member of
National Newspapers Publishers Association •
North Carolina Press Association • North Carolina
Black Publishers Association • Inland Press Association

National Advertising Representative:
Amalgamated Publishers, Inc., 45 West 45th Street,
New York, NY 10036 212 / 869-5220

Postmaster: send address changes to:
THE CHRONICLE
P.O. BOX 1636
Winston-Salem, NC 27102

CONTACT US:

phone number: **336 / 722-8624**
fax: **336 / 723-9173**
website address: www.netunlimited.net/~wschron
email address: wschron@netunlimited.net

Sports Editor 723-8428 SAM DAVIS
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