

Debate focuses on racial and gender goals

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"That is the least risk from legal challenges. Overall, the vehicle expands the pool of small businesses, which many will be minority- and women-owned."



Lochman

Council members can consider four options: leave the year-old race- and gender-neutral program in place, attach specific goals through SBO and outreach programs; add race and gender programs on specific projects or replace SBO with what

amounts to the former Minority and Women Business Development program.

The potential for legal challenge is at the heart of the council debate. Charlotte's MWBD was scotched in 2002 after the city was sued amid allegations the program gave minorities an unfair advantage.

Assistant City Attorney Cindy White said each option carry varying amounts of risk. Neutral programs are more likely to survive legal challenges than those that add specific race and gender goals.

"Programs that are race-neutral are less subject to

strict judicial standards," she said. "With respect to the (U.S.) Constitution, options 1 and 2 are lower risk."

"The whole subject matter plays into a legal framework," Lassiter said. "The former program went too far according to the North Carolina Supreme Court. There are obviously members of council who want to aggressively push the envelope and others who don't. But that's OK because it's something that should be discussed."

Added council member Don Lochman: "There's a legal risk as well as financial ramifications. The city is running a \$6 million deficit we're trying to close."

The city has programs in place to help small businesses compete for public projects, including a loan pool and education seminars, but black business owners have complained the city hasn't gone far enough. A survey published last year detailed that black-owned firms received fewer public contracts under the race-neutral program than before its launch.

A flashpoint for the contractors' complaints is the new arena under construction uptown. Contracts totaling \$8.35 million have gone to small businesses on the project, but minority groups have earned only \$1.37 million. The total budgeted to

small business is \$50 million.

Lochman cautions that one year isn't enough time to gauge SBO's effectiveness. Courts would be more likely to OK specific remedies where a municipality can prove minorities and women aren't benefiting from the current program. That takes time.

"The more time you give it, the more credibility you have

should you have a need down the road for something more strenuous," he said.

White agrees.

"If it were apparent from the numbers that the program wasn't making progress, you'd have a better chance of implementing a race-conscious program," she said. "The longer you go on the time continuum, the stronger your legal position is."

Ivory Coast rivals edge toward dialogue



ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO/BEN CURTIS

Bystanders gather around the corpse of Daouda babayato after it was dumped in the upmarket Deux Plateau district of the Ivory Coast capital Abidjan earlier this month. Eyewitnesses claimed he was shot during a shootout between armed robbers and the police. Law and order in the world's largest cocoa producer has deteriorated alongside the decline in hopes for peace.

By Loucoumane Coulibaly
REUTERS

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast — Ivory Coast edged toward a dialogue on Saturday after a mediator said President Laurent Gbagbo was ready to accept opposition demands.

Opposition politicians in the world's top cocoa grower, split in half by a civil war, gave a guarded response to the development. But they said they were working with the prime minister on a written agreement to address their concerns.

A peace process aimed at reuniting the country descended into crisis last month. Dozens of people were killed after security

forces suppressed an attempted anti-Gbagbo march and opposition parties began to boycott a power-sharing government.

But after meeting Gbagbo on Friday, Niger's President Tandja Mamadou said the Ivorian head of state had accepted "all the preconditions" the opposition has set for restarting talks with him as a possible prelude to a return to government.

Among the opposition's demands were that Gbagbo recognize the right to hold protests and that state media should give equal access to all political groups. It also wants security guarantees for the population after last month's killings.

Mamadou, visiting both

sides of the political divide as head of the West African Economic and Monetary Union, made his statement at a news conference with Gbagbo but the Ivorian president himself did not refer to the opposition demands.

"We take note of what President Gbagbo has stated," said Alphonse Djedje Mady, the spokesman for the opposition alliance, which includes both political parties and the rebel forces who control the northern half of the country.

"We will meet the prime minister (Seydou Diarra) this afternoon to finalize what we have begun. Since Tuesday we have been working with the prime minister on the crisis," he said.

School district sponsors college fair

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"CMS now has pathways," Porter said of the importance of information for middle school students at the fair. "This gives them an opportunity to understand what classes they need to take."

The National Association for College Admission Counseling is sponsoring the fair, one of 26 held in U.S. cities, including Atlanta, Miami and New York.

An advisement center staffed by school counselors will assist families on how to make the best use of available resources and how to develop a plan for attending college.

Porter said the fair will help parents understand how to pay for college and give them a better grasp on the college search process and what kids need in high school.

The fair is free and open to the public, however, parking is \$5.

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