

Howard Lee: For Him System The Only Way

by Harry Bryan
Associate Editor



Howard Lee, Chapel Hill's black mayor, has attracted a lot of attention in his first term as mayor. He plans on running for re-election this spring, and future plans call for "definite thinking" about running for lieutenant governor.

Howard Lee is black. Howard Lee is also mayor of Chapel Hill, a position that makes him unique among the members of his race.

He is the only black to be elected mayor in a predominantly white southern town since reconstruction.

To many members of his race, he is an Uncle Tom, but to many others he is an example of a black man finding success working through the system.

The son of a Georgia sharecropper, Lee has become a nationally-known figure since his term of office began in May of 1969. He has spent much of his time in the limelight, but his job has not been an easy one, particularly in the first few months of his administration.

"For the first four or five months, I had a lot of problems," he said in an interview last week. "First, it took people a while to realize that I was really mayor. Second, I was aggressive, and many people really didn't understand that. Third, both the black and white communities were not really sure that I could do the job."

Most of those problems are gone.

Many people, both black and white, have lashed out at Lee for working through the system, but as far as Lee is concerned, it is the only way for him to accomplish the goals he has set for the community.

"The system is so big and tough that there is no way to hit it from the outside," he said. "It's like throwing a ball against a wall—the ball just bounces off and the system keeps on going."

"What you must do is to move inside the system and seek out and develop relationships with people on the inside who agree with you and then work to change it."

Being a black mayor in a primarily white political system has proved to make Lee's job easier than if he were white.

"I have gotten more attention and more support because I am known and black," he said. "Doors have been opening quicker because people are willing to help."

"The fact that there are so many blacks trying to attack the system has also helped. The people on the outside

have made my job easier on the inside. "Whites know they're going to have to work with someone, and they know that if they don't deal with me, they're going to have to deal with groups like the Black Panthers."

Lee said he has also been able to disarm many of the blacks who were calling him a "Tom" when he first took office.

"Howard Fuller (head of the Malcolm X Liberation University in Greensboro)

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and I were at odds at the beginning," he said, "but now I believe we have developed sort of a mutual understanding."

Lee's election to office has had a great psychological effect on blacks and whites throughout the state.

"Many more blacks are beginning to believe in themselves," Lee said. "They're beginning to believe that they do have a place in the system."

"The goals of young people are being raised, too. They're seeing that they can move higher than they previously thought."

Whites have also been affected.

"I really feel I have touched the attitudes of white blue collar workers," Lee said. "I think they're learning that what helps black workers also helps white workers."

"I have been very flattered to have white labor groups ask me to speak to them, and many have asked me to run for office in 1972."

"These things must be seen as nebulous but giant steps for these people."

Concrete changes have also been noticed since Lee became mayor, the most important of which is in low income housing in Chapel Hill.

According to Lee, there were only 60 low income housing units in Chapel Hill when he took office. At that time, he said, there were 300 applications for housing and at least 150 houses in the town that could have been condemned "without thinking twice."

Progress has been slow, but a 44-unit project will be opened soon, and construction will begin in two weeks on a

total of 56 units in three weeks.

Lee said plans for 100 more units are expected to be approved soon and that a plan for 1,000 is now pending.

Not only is he working to have the units built, but he is also working to make certain the projects do not become re-located ghettos.

"There is always the possibility of this happening," he said. "I have found that in many cases people are just lifted from

expected to be running by late fall. Lee said the Cape Valley Transit Co. from Fayetteville is currently doing a survey of the needs of such a bus line.

—the first steps in taking control of public utilities away from the University. Lee said he felt the town is now ready to take the utilities and could run them more efficiently than the University.

"We believe the University's mission is education," Lee said. "We also believe

dilapidated housing into new housing with no change in values or aspirations or anything else.

"We must not allow this to happen." Lee's plans for the housing units include three programs:

—providing social service assistance to counsel relocated families to help them adjust.

—allowing UNC students with families to move into the housing to provide a better racial mix and possibly give the relocated families more incentive.

—the "dispersion concept" in which huge housing projects would not be allowed. At present, Lee said plans call for no project to include more than 44 units.

"One can't be sure what effect these changes will have," Lee said, "but we hope this will prevent ghettos from forming."

Included in Lee's plans for this year are:

—a neighborhood redevelopment program with \$300,000 from the National Urban Renewal Program to be spent to improve housing, lighting, road construction and the like and \$280,000 to be spent for recreation facilities.

—an organized program to work on drug abuse in the community.

—a citizen's participation program to give the townspeople a chance to determine what goals the town should work to achieve.

—the development of a 40-acre recreation area in the Lake Forest section in Northwest Chapel Hill.

—a bus line covering Carrboro, Chapel Hill and the University campus which is

that those who have the responsibility for the welfare of the community should run the utilities."

Lee said the town decided to take control of the utilities when the University announced a 150 per cent increase in water rates over the summer.

"The University said the increase was necessary to improve the system," Lee said. "This led us to believe that we are better able to handle the situation."

Though he and the University may soon be at odds over the utilities, Lee says he feels no bitterness of feelings towards the University.

In fact, he readily admits that he probably would not have been elected mayor if it were not for the attitude the University has created in the community.

"Chapel Hill should be proud that the University is here," Lee said. "Not only is the school the major industry in and around the town; the town also gets many free services from the different schools in the University."

"We have received much help from the Institute of Government, in particular."

Lee also said he received overwhelming support from students and faculty members during his campaign for mayor.

As far as personal plans are concerned, Lee said he is "definitely planning" on running for re-election in the spring.

However, he is also "definitely thinking" about lieutenant governor in 1972 and rumors have been circulating that he is also thinking about running for Congress.

"The reaction of most people throughout the state has been very encouraging," Lee said. "I am definitely in politics to stay."

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