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Atlantic City mayor hopefuls have their own urban plans: Three of the. five A.C. mayoral candidates are African-Americans

By Vincent Thompson

Tribune staff

ATLANTIC CITY -- There is a real good chance that the next mayor of Atlantic City, N.J. will be an African-American.

The reason is that three of the five candidates running today (May 10) in that city's election to lead the East Coast gambling mecca are African-American. They are Kaleem Shabazz, former chairman of the Atlantic City Zoning Board; City Councilman Lorenzo Langford, and **Walter Palmer**, a long-time community activist and currently a popular local radio talk show host.

Shabazz, 47, the past immediate director of the Atlantic County chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, alleges that while casino gambling has been in place in Atlantic City since 1976, the billions of dollars that's generated yearly by the casino industry haven't been used to help the local economy and the people living in the city.

He claims that this lack of investment into Atlantic City by the casinos, which includes the casinos giving non-white owned businesses less than 10 percent of business contracts has lead to the city becoming "the purgatory of the poor."

Add to these problems that Atlantic City has second highest unemployment rate in the nation and is being impacted more daily by crime, Shabazz said that as mayor he would set up an individual city coordination council and community development corporation to oversee city development; establish a development bank that'll deal with capital and credit needs of small businesses; advocate that banks establish a reinvestment fund for neighborhood and small business improvements; and

develop a minority set-aside law that would require construction firms to hire subcontractors and laborers as a priority to doing business with the casinos.

The programs would be funded with money set aside from casino parking fees, banks and the city's Casino Reinvestment Development Corp. (CRDC), which was created by state law to reinvest a portion of the money collected from gambling revenues back into Atlantic City.

Palmer, Shabazz, and Langford agree that incumbent Mayor James Whelan, who is also running for re-election to a second four-year term, has done a poor job in office and the city needs a change.

"At best, the Whelan record, which spans eight years on City Council and four years as mayor, is abysmal and lacking any comprehensive approach to development in this resort city," Shabazz said last week.

". . . While Mayor Whelan was in leadership positions in this city, Atlantic City's neighborhoods and small businesses declined and the well being of youth reached a crisis-stage," he said "Atlantic City's government has become totally dependent on casino development as a tax base."

Langford, 39, who has been a member of City Council for the past two years, would also advocate more economic development by being an active member of the CRDA's board, according to Wilbur Banks, his campaign manager.

"He would establish 'Atlantic City First' partnerships with casinos and all boards and authorities to provide first opportunities for jobs to Atlantic City residents," Banks said.

Shabazz and Langford both promise to hire a public safety director, put more police on the streets to fight crime but Langford promises to have a city "drug czar" to look into the drug problem.

Banks said Langford would implement a citywide housing rehabilitation program convert vacant homes, increase the summer youth job programs for teenagers, and support the hiring of a "budget examiner for City Council as a checks and balances."

When told that it appears that Langford and Shabazz's platforms on issues are very much alike, Shabazz said that "there's not that much difference."

Banks said: "I don't see any likeness. Anybody who resides in this city knows what needs to be done."

Whelan, 45, a native of Philadelphia, was a city Councilman for eight years before replacing Atlantic City's first African-American mayor, James Usry, who was drummed out of office because of illegal conduct.

In published reports, Whelan has defended his tenure as mayor saying his leadership of Atlantic City hasn't been as poor as his opponents are claiming. Palmer, Shabazz, and Whelan are Democrats and Langford is an independent. Attempts to contact Palmer and Whelan were unsuccessful.

Shabazz promises also to increase support in the local arts scene, increase the number of police officers on the streets from 65 percent of the force to 85 percent, implement community policing citywide and increase the number of officers in high crime areas and in Atlantic City's business district.

"What I want to see is a city that is family orientated attraction in addition to gaming," he said. "I want to see a city that has a bigger residential base, more home ownership, a more developed central business core, greater neighborhood revitalization, and a state-of-the-art child care facility. In the last 15 years, we have build 12 casinos at an estimated \$200 to \$300 million per casino and not one child care facility which shows where our priorities are."

The other person running for mayor in the election is Kim Fioriglio, an Atlantic City fire captain who has been with the department for the past 19 years. Fioriglio, 44, is a member of the Natural Law Party, a political party that believes "in the establishment of programs that support Natural Law. Natural law are those laws that are predictable and proven to govern the way life works."

His major platform is to bring start a anti-crime plan that would bring into Atlantic City a "Group for Government" team, which would be a group of people that would use meditation, education and crisis intervention to help reduce the underlying causes of crime.

If anyone of the five candidates doesn't get more than 50 percent of the vote on Election Day, the top two voter getters will face each other during a special run-off in June. A run-off election is expected to happen.

The eventually winner of the mayor's race will begin serving a four-year term starting July 1.