Urban Beat Commentary

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Could San Diego follow Los Angeles losing its African American voice on City Council?

Whether consciously or not, African Americans in San Diego are approaching a form of extinction—not physically, but in our presence and influence within political, economic, and educational spaces. Representation is diminishing, and the evidence is visible across the city's leadership and community institutions.

A cautionary parallel can be found in Los Angeles. For the first time in sixty years, LA City Council District 9—long considered the epicenter of Black political power in South Central—will not have an African American candidate on the ballot, nor will a Black person hold the seat. This district once symbolized progress that began in 1963, when Gilbert Lindsay became the first Black person elected to the Los Angeles City Council. Historically, it was one of the few areas where Black residents were allowed to live, build community, and exercise political influence.

San Diego's Council District 4 carries a similar legacy. The appointment of Leon Williams in 1969 marked a turning point toward a more inclusive city. That momentum was built on milestones, including Rev. George Walker Smith's election to the Board of Education in 1963 and Charles Reed's election to the Community College District in 1973. These achievements ensured that African American leadership had a foothold in city and county governance.

Over time, African American leaders held prominent roles throughout San Diego's public institutions. Representation extended to the Community College District, San Diego Convention Center, San Diego Regional Airport Authority, Port Authority, and San Diego Unified School District Board of Education. San Diego and North County government also saw firsts: an African American City Manager at the City of San Diego, Chief County Administrator, Superintendent at the County Board of Education, and even the first Black Mayor elected within the region in Oceanside.

And private sector executives at Greater San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, SDG&E/SEMPRA and Jack-in-the-Box.

Today, however, it is fair to ask whether African American leadership in San Diego has become more historical than current. The pathway for renewed representation appears increasingly unclear, due in part to a lack of cohesiveness within the Black community.

This lack of cohesion is not only political or generational; it is also rooted in how identity, history, and shared experience are understood within the broader Black community.

The terms African American and Black should not be treated as interchangeable. Doing so overlooks the distinct history, experiences, and contributions of African Americans in the ongoing struggle for equality.

This erosion is closely tied to generational shifts. Many Millennials and Gen Z—sometimes referred to as "Generation Glass"—have not experienced prolonged collective struggle faced by African Americans and therefore may not fully grasp what was sacrificed to gain past representation. Without that understanding, the urgency to preserve political power diminishes. Reversing this decline requires intentional efforts to bridge generational divides, instill shared purpose, and recommit to advocacy and unity across age and background.

Malcolm X once warned, "Times change so quickly that if you and I don't keep up with the time, we'll find ourselves with an umbrella in our hand when the sun is out." That warning resonates today. Preserving African American leadership demands vigilance, adaptability, and action. If we do not respond collectively, we risk becoming obsolete clinging to traditions that no longer serve our community.

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