

The State of Black Boston

Civic Engagement and Leadership

Why Black Business Development Matters Most

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As the Chair of the Multicultural Committee of the Greater Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau I am delighted that the State of Black Boston kicks off a week of nonstop events in connection to the National Urban League Annual Conference. Bringing diverse meetings to Boston is our committee's main objective, and understanding the economic impact of this week's event is why this convention is so important to our local economy.

Congratulations to the **Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts** for hosting such an austere yearly gathering.

It is in that spirit that I reflect on the issues facing Black Boston in an effort to design a better path to our future. As a 24 year small business owner I understand that the true path to Civic Engagement and Leadership is through job creation and an expanded role in business development. The only way the Black community will advance is by addressing the opportunities in small business development, personal wealth creation, civic engagement and cultivating strategic business collaborations. That combination should be our primary focus for the the next 10-15 years.

Here is my list of the top FOUR leadership issues we face in our community

1. Over-representation of Black leaders in nonprofit organizations
2. Over representation of Black leaders in education
3. Over representation of Black leaders in community based and faith based organizations
4. Under representation of Black leaders in small businesses or as C-suite executives

This is NOT an indictment nor an attack on our educators, our ministers or our nonprofit executives. This speaks more to what must occur in business in order for our communities to turn the corner on poverty and historical victimization.

The 2010 ULEM State of Black Boston report states the following:

- There are approximately 2,200 businesses located in the Black community as defined by zip codes 02119, 02121, 02124, and 02126.
- According to ReferenceUSA the majority of the businesses in the Black community generated sales in the area of retail, services, and health of less than \$500,000; another 500 or so businesses generated sales of between \$500,000 and \$1 million, and the remainder generated sales of more than \$1 million in 2008.

In the June 2011 issue of Black Enterprise Magazine (BE) listing the top 100 businesses in the United States only TWO Boston based businesses are included in the issue:

One United Bank (Financial Services Category)
RhumbLine Advisers (Financial Services Category)

No Boston based or Massachusetts based businesses are listed on the Black Enterprise Industrial/Service Companies Category.

Even though there are a few successful privately owned multimillion dollar Black businesses that are not listed on the BE Top 100 list, Black business development in greater Boston is still underrepresented. (One of those companies not included on the BE list employs 300-400 people.)

Manufacturing and Job Creation

One of the best examples of the impact of Black business development is the evolution of **Roxbury Technology** (roxburytechnology.com) from a small three person manufacturing operation to a \$12 million company that employs 65 people. Started by visionary entrepreneur Archie Williams, the company has been run by Williams' daughter, Beth Williams since 2003 who succeeded her father as owner upon his death. Her leadership skills, commitment to the community, and business connections demonstrates the value of civic en-

agement where it matters most: helping the Black community to grow from the inside out.

“This country was built on manufacturing,” states Beth Williams. “And half of the problem with the country today is that we’ve sourced out all of those jobs to other countries.”

Williams demonstrates her commitment to the community repeatedly by how she treats her employees and the support she gives to other initiatives, including my very own Multicultural Symposium Series. Roxbury Technology has been a longtime sponsor of my company’s events.

Her concern for the minority community is tied to her commitment to job creation and company profitability. “They [other competitors] are so busy driving the cost out of business that they have forgotten about the people aspect. I may not be getting the same profit as someone getting \$2 a week for an employee with no benefits, but we’re still able to make a profit and stay sustainable.”

The Future Lies With Us

Black People Are The Answer To Business Development, Civic Engagement and Leadership. We hold the key to job growth, sustainability and wealth creation. Access to capital and cash flow issues remain the primary deterrent to business growth in the community, and that is where advocate organizations like the **Urban League** can play a vital role in helping Black business get the money they need to grow their businesses.

Boston’s Black community deserves a new commitment to business development. The resources, expertise, and talents are available to positively impact the region by stimulating business growth.

As a longtime entrepreneur, I hope the day will come when civic engagement is easily represented by the countless Black owned businesses topping the Black Enterprise list and creating the job bank so needed for our community’s economic vitality for the future.

Carole Copeland Thomas

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