



Office of the Mayor
200 E 8th Ave
Pine Bluff, AR 71603

October 11, 2019

Signing Statement by Mayor Washington on Resolution 4212

At the core of public service is honoring the stewardship entrusted to us by the people. As city leaders, we must keep promises to the people, and nothing is more sacred than our word.

In June 2017, seventy percent of Pine Bluff voters approved a new sales tax. Citizens were told the tax would generate an estimated \$32 million over the next seven years. In collaboration with the city, Go Forward Pine Bluff (GFPB) was authorized by the public to invest those funds into 26 initiatives related to education, economic development, government/infrastructure, and quality of life. Together, the funding and plan would improve the overall condition of the city. At the heart of the 2017 proposal was a promise, one some elected officials are now attempting to break. I do not take their actions lightly. Citizens should be mindful of rhetoric and any attempt to weaken the progress made over the last two years.

On October 7, 2019, the Pine Bluff City Council voted to reallocate significant funds from the GFPB plan. This decision blatantly contradicts the promise made to spend these funds on the 26 initiatives. Furthermore, it hinders the ability of GFPB to complete several projects and initiatives for which it has already planned.

The council stated that withdrawing these funds would allow the city to finance other items in its budget. However, in conjunction with various employees and community leaders working with my office, I have identified alternative means to provide that



funding. Unlike the resolution advanced by the council, my proposal does not extract money from existing GFPB projects. It upholds the promise made to the people.

One of the concerns addressed by this resolution is public safety. Both the fire and police departments provided the council with a list of supplies and resources needed within their departments. Although every need deserves consideration, increasing the salaries of our hard-working first responders is the top priority. For years Pine Bluff has struggled to compete with neighboring cities in recruiting and retaining talented safety personnel. The resolution does not include a plan to raise salaries adequately. To address this, I will propose a salary increase in the 2020 budget.

In addition to much-deserved pay raises, I have been working with GFPB to enact more incentives for safety personnel. A homeowner's program is currently in effect that provides down payment and closing cost assistance to first responders that commit to serving in Pine Bluff for five years. When combined with salary increases, these incentives will give Pine Bluff the foundation it needs to compete with other cities.

In addition to public safety, the resolution calls for youth and community resources. However, my office is acting aggressively to construct new recreational facilities, upgrade community parks, and renovate existing youth centers. For example, the city opened a multi-million-dollar, state-of-the-art aquatic center in June 2019. This was made possible due to public funding, including four million dollars from the GFPB sales tax and donations from community partners. Subsequently, the city received an \$800,000 Youth Engagement and Sport grant to fund programs within the aquatic center. Youth and adults now have access to swimming and other water-related activities.

The Merrill Community Center is also in the final planning stage for a \$700,000 renovation expected to begin in 2019. This upgrade will transform the facility into a cleaner, safer space for youth to spend their time. Furthermore, the city is in the process



of securing a grant from the Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism to build a new pavilion in Townsend Park. Extracting money from GFPB to address these needs is irresponsible when the city is currently working on these matters.

The council also approved allocating \$300,000 from the 5/8 cent sales tax to the convention center. This is another duplication of existing efforts as the sales tax has funded nearly one million dollars in convention center renovation cost. The \$300,000 approval does not consider existing efforts by the Pine Bluff Urban Renewal Agency (which is a product of GFPB) to acquire the Plaza Hotel. We stand much to gain through the establishment of a hotel and convention center complex. The approved resolution is a threat to such an economic game-changer for the city of Pine Bluff.

Lastly, the council is calling for improvements to our drainage system. This has been a top priority since my first day. I, along with economic and community development, are working with Civil Engineering Associates, LLC, to perform a comprehensive assessment of the city's drains, including the Harding drain, one of the largest and most complex in the city. This will identify the areas in need of improvement and provide the most effective strategy to mediate those problems.

In closing, while I sympathize with the concerns voiced by the council in the passing of this resolution, I do not believe they have identified a viable solution. We cannot fix one set of problems by modifying and adjusting strategies and resources that are working to move our city forward. GFPB should be allowed to complete the projects for which it has planned.

Our city is on the verge of major development. Not only can residents see the progress being made, but individuals from around the state and country. This development can lead to a stronger economy, more jobs, the expansion of affordable housing, increased



tourism, and educational excellence. However, we must all stay the course, perform selflessly, and focus substantially on the business of the city.

In short, while I have signed this legislation, I do so with significant reservations, and it is predicated only on my intention to alter this action by a forthcoming proposal.

As written, the action passed October 7th, demonstrates a willingness to break promises and it lacks a basic understanding of the process and interdependence of the various methods the city is using to improve our community.

I look forward to the passage of further legislation, which will remedy this disregard for promises to the public. As past behavior is often a predictor of future performance, the willingness of some to blatantly break promises to our citizens is something alarming.