

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 23

Commending the participants of the 40th anniversary celebration in Hampton Roads of the passage of the Voting Rights Act.

Agreed to by the Senate, January 12, 2006

Agreed to by the House of Delegates, January 20, 2006

WHEREAS, Thelma F. Harrison, George H. Banks, and Cephas C. Wright, Hampton Roads area activists and veterans of the civil rights movement, are recognized for their contributions to the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the passage of the Voting Rights Act; and

WHEREAS, the Voting Rights Act, signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson on August 6, 1965, outlawed literacy tests, provided power to the federal government to register qualified citizens in specified jurisdictions according to a formula provided in the statute, and required these jurisdictions to obtain prior approval from the District Court for the District of Columbia or the United States Attorney General before enacting any new voting practices or procedures; and

WHEREAS, the poll tax in national elections had been abolished by the 24th Amendment in 1964, but the Voting Rights Act directed the Attorney General to challenge the use of the poll tax in state and local elections; and

WHEREAS, Thelma Harrison was born in Lamberts Point and grew up in Norfolk and New York, becoming one of the first black nurses at Lenox Hill Hospital in the City of New York; and

WHEREAS, raised to be community-minded, Thelma Harrison never participated in a group protest or sit-in, but she worked diligently through church missions to help the poor and needy residents of the community; and

WHEREAS, Thelma Harrison strongly urges her fellow citizens in Norfolk to support change and renewal in their community by exercising their precious right to vote; and

WHEREAS, George Banks, vice president of Berkley's Beacon Light Civic League in Norfolk and past president of the local chapter of the NAACP, recalls that Virginia escaped the serious violence that occurred in Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, but that the poll tax and literacy tests were nonetheless intimidating—not only did you have to pay a tax when wages were meager, but you had to read part of the Constitution before you were eligible to register—and many people just stayed home; and

WHEREAS, George Banks remembers Reverend King's famous speech on the Mall in Washington, D.C., in 1963 and was inspired and enthralled by the tide of emotion; he returned home to register voters and to work with the local civic league to have the poll tax and the literacy examination abolished; and

WHEREAS, George Banks witnessed the power of the vote in his own community of Norfolk firsthand and encourages his fellow citizens to use that power for change; and

WHEREAS, Cephas Wright served in the United States Coast Guard and is a retired postal worker, who volunteers at polling stations in his Portsmouth community of Prentis Park; he also helped with voter registration drives and recalls the absurd questions and other unfair practices associated with the literacy tests and poll tax; and

WHEREAS, Cephas Wright witnessed the election of the first black majority on City Council, which resulted from the increased registration of minority groups; and

WHEREAS, concerned about the low rate of registration among young black voters, Cephas Wright insists that every vote makes a huge difference in bringing change to the community; and

WHEREAS, Thelma F. Harrison, George H. Banks, and Cephas C. Wright are admired and respected citizens, who take great pride in their heritage and remind all of the citizens of Virginia to ensure a safe and prosperous future by participating in their government and casting their vote; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate, the House of Delegates concurring, That the General Assembly commend Thelma F. Harrison, George H. Banks, and Cephas C. Wright for their contributions to the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the passage of the Voting Rights Act; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the Senate prepare a copy of this resolution for presentation to Thelma F. Harrison, George H. Banks, and Cephas C. Wright as an expression of the General Assembly's gratitude for their dedication to the citizens of Hampton Roads and the Commonwealth.

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