

Governor holds a 'long overdue' talk with blacks

They urged Dayton to help close the jobs gap between blacks, whites.

By **RANDY FURST**, Star Tribune

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More than 400 people jammed a hall in north Minneapolis on Wednesday for something not seen in 24 years: a Minnesota governor in the heart of the city's black community listening to their concerns.

"It's long overdue," Gov. Mark Dayton said after the "Black Economic Summit" organized by community leaders had concluded.

His note pad in hand, Dayton stood and listened for more than two hours as a series of black leaders, business representatives and community members urged that the state act to close an economic divide in which black Minnesotans are far more likely than their white neighbors to have no jobs and little money.

"There seems to be two Minnesotas, one black, one white, both separate and unequal," said Prof. Nekima Levy-Pounds of the University of St. Thomas in the opening presentation.

Wednesday's meeting at the University of Minnesota Research and Outreach Center at 2001 Plymouth Av. had seating for only about 200 people. But with

minimal publicity, people, including a host of political officeholders, flooded the meeting, standing along the sides of the room and pouring out into the corridors.

"To see this room overflowing is impressive," said Dayton.

The governor spoke only briefly at the beginning and end of the session, except in response to Lisa Crockett of Minneapolis, who wanted to know who was accountable when state hiring practices go awry.

"I'm accountable," Dayton answered, taking the microphone from state Rep. Bobby Joe Champion, DFL-Minneapolis, who was chairing the meeting.

At the conclusion, Dayton announced that his staff would review all of the recommendations and issue a report in nine days, including a list of changes he could make by executive order and steps that would require legislation. "I promise we will move forward and we will move forward together," Dayton said.

Rev. Jerry McAfee said that he first raised the idea of an economic summit when he met with Dayton early in his campaign for governor. Later in his campaign, Dayton met with a larger group of blacks at the Minneapolis Urban League and promised to return to Minneapolis for such a gathering if he was elected.

"When you make a promise to a preacher, you better keep it," Dayton told the crowd.

Dayton was accompanied Wednesday by several of

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his newly appointed commissioners and senior staff, some of whom are black. In his remarks to the crowd, Champion took note of "the diversity of Governor Dayton's Cabinet."

But the heart of the meeting was a blunt discussion of the problems facing the black community.

Roger Banks, speaking for the Council on Black Minnesotans, said that blacks in Minnesota are "acutely aware" of the deterioration in their conditions. In some indices of employment, housing and criminal justice, Minnesota's black community ranks near the bottom of the nation, he said.

The Star Tribune reported last week that a review of data from four government and nonprofit entities found that the disparity between blacks and whites in unemployment was the widest in the nation, with Minnesota blacks having among the country's highest jobless rates and Minnesota whites among the lowest levels of unemployment.

Some described those numbers in stark terms. Levy-Pounds said that when she came to Minnesota she was told it was a land of opportunity and equality, but that instead she found a sharp difference in the quality of life for whites and blacks.

She described an "unemployment crisis" in which the black jobless rate of over 20 percent was more than three times that of whites in Minnesota, the four-year graduation rate for black high school students was 40 percent, half the rate of whites, and while whites in Minnesota had one of the lowest poverty

rates in the nation, 36 percent of blacks lived in poverty, fifth highest in the country.

She called for a targeted jobs bill to deal with the crisis. She also urged an expansion of youth employment training funds for urban youth and programs to improve science and math in the schools to better prepare teens for jobs.

Former Hennepin County District Judge Pam Alexander, now president of the Council on Crime and Justice in Minnesota, said that ex-offenders getting out of prison had difficulty getting jobs and housing and she urged legislation to help them so that they do not re-offend. "Minnesota is a state of perpetual punishment," she said.

Other speakers included Ravi Norman of Thor Construction, Lea Harget of the Minnesota Black Chamber of Commerce, Tim Childs, who owns TLC Wafer Precision, a technology firm in north Minneapolis, and Louis King of HIRE Minnesota. They offered detailed recommendations on the handling of contracts to increase the number of minorities hired.

Rep. Jeff Hayden, DFL-Minneapolis, told the crowd that meeting would send a clear message that "we love this community" but that there was a need for good jobs.

After the meeting, Dayton was surrounded by the crowd. Many told him that they voted for him and that they were grateful he had come to north Minneapolis.

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The last governor who came to talk to Minneapolis blacks on either the north or south side about their issues is believed to be Rudy Perpich, who visited North High School in March 1987, 24 years ago. Gov. Jesse Ventura met with the Phillips Neighborhood about light-rail issues in 2000.

Staff librarian John Wareham contributed research for this article.

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