

Housing, battling racism and a municipal bank top agenda for L.A. council president

<http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-wesson-speech-20170725-story.html>



City Council President Herb Wesson speaks at Los Angeles City Hall last month.

(Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times)



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Los Angeles should explore whether to create a municipal bank that would finance affordable housing and throw its doors open to the cannabis industry, [City Council](#) President [Herb Wesson](#) said Tuesday.

Wesson tossed out the idea as part of a sweeping speech that set out his agenda for his final term. In addition to the bank, Wesson said L.A. must take new and innovative steps to battle racism, protect immigrants and build more affordable housing.

“When our grandchildren tell stories of us, what will they say? Will they say we were brave?” asked Wesson, who recently was reelected as council president. “When the history books remember us, will they say that we did everything within our power to improve the lives of the people we represent?”

To combat hatred, Wesson wants the city to help organize scores of intimate dinners between people of different races, faiths and backgrounds. To defend immigrants, he wants the city to craft new legislation. And to ensure more affordable housing is built, Wesson wants a new commission to think up ideas.

But his most unexpected proposal was forming a bank: Wesson suggested that a municipal bank could help finance affordable housing, provide loans for small businesses and entrepreneurs, and give the marijuana industry a [safe place](#) to park its cash. Cannabis businesses have been shut out of [many banks](#) and rely heavily on cash transactions.

“Do you know, we’ve got people that are going to go home tonight and sleep on a mattress that’s worth \$2 million?” Wesson said, alluding to marijuana entrepreneurs stashing cash at home. “We have to figure out a way to make this industry work. We in government are supposed to push the envelope, not protect the status quo.”

The Southern California Coalition, a marijuana industry group, welcomed the idea. “The cannabis industry is perceived to be a sitting duck for crime because it’s heavily cash based,” said Adam Spiker, the group’s executive director, adding that marijuana businesses also struggle to get loans and have had trouble finding landlords willing to accept cash.

The speech, which was promoted in advance to the media, had the feel of another State of the City address. Wesson, a former speaker of the California State Assembly, greeted fellow council members Tuesday by saying that the inauguration ceremony earlier this month was “the mayor’s day,” while “today is our day.”

Ahead of his speech, a video revisited some celebrated moments for the City Council, including increasing the citywide minimum wage, passing a bond to help the homeless and courting the Olympics.

Wesson, 65, led his remarks with a story, recounting that white men had pelted him with a milkshake and called him racial slurs when he was a 12-year-old headed to the movies in Ohio. He went on to list a number of hateful incidents in the last year, including the desecration of Jewish cemeteries and the slaying of two men trying to defend a Muslim girl on a Portland, Ore., train.

“We cannot stand by and allow bad people to roll back the clock on the progress that we have made, not just in this city, but in this country,” Wesson said.

Wesson plans to partner with Community Coalition, an advocacy group formerly led by City Councilman Marqueece Harris-Dawson, to host more than 100 small dinners that bring Angelenos together throughout the city.

After the speech, he told reporters that he believed face-to-face dinners could change the world, saying that such discussions at college and church had helped him let go of a hardened heart after he was attacked as a youth.

To address the housing crisis facing Angelenos, Wesson said he wanted a new commission to come up with strategies to make it easier to build affordable housing. The commission, created in partnership with the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce and the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, could explore everything from speeding up permits to repurposing shipping containers, Wesson said.

Wesson said a municipal bank also could help finance more affordable housing. He did not go into details Tuesday about how precisely the L.A. bank would work, saying that he wanted Councilman [Paul Krekorian](#) to start examining the idea and see whether it was worthwhile.

The idea of a public bank has been championed by some local activists who see it as a way to keep money in the community and steer clear of “unethical investments.” North Dakota created a public bank nearly a century ago; campaigns to create public banks have popped up in Oakland, San Francisco and other cities.

As of Tuesday afternoon, more than 400 people had signed a Change.org petition backing a Los Angeles municipal public bank “accountable to the people.” Phoenix Goodman, one of the co-founders of Public Bank L.A., said that activists who want Los Angeles to divest from Wells Fargo had realized that they needed “an ethical alternative.”

“The real solution isn’t going from a big bank to another big bank — it’s transcending Wall Street altogether,” Goodman said.

But the idea also drew some skepticism Tuesday. The city has “structural deficits going on forever and now they want to start a bank?” said Jack Humphreville, who serves on the Neighborhood Council Budget Advocates, which provides input for city leaders on the budget.

The [last time](#) Wesson gave such a speech two years ago, some wondered whether the prominent address meant he was angling to replace Mayor [Eric Garcetti](#). The Tuesday address comes three years before the [powerful](#) and charismatic politician will be termed out of the City Council.

In his speech, Wesson repeatedly cast his gaze beyond Los Angeles to the nation at large. But when asked, Wesson said that didn’t mean he was eyeing any kind of national office — only emphasizing that Los Angeles could lead the country toward progress.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Wesson said. “L.A. is stuck with me.”