

Alexandria Blacks List Grievances

Council Hears Panel In 'Historic' Session

By Michel Marriott
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The Alexandria City Council last night heard a panel of black citizens present a list of complaints and criticisms headed by a crisis in public housing and underrepresentation of blacks in the city government.

Nearly 500 people, most of them black, crowded into the Robert E. Lee Recreation Center auditorium on the city's south side to hear seven members of a group called the Alexandria Forum present their grievances at the special meeting with the council. Mayor Charles E. Beatley called the session a historic first.

Former council member Nelson E. Greene, the program's moderator, said black Alexandrians are "worried, afraid and restless." That introduction led to presentations by six speakers, each discussing a different topic, such as affirmative action, the need for greater crime control and greater educational opportunities for blacks.

One of the major complaints of black Alexandrians active in civic affairs has been that blacks are not sought out and appointed to key commissions or boards. Ferdinand T. Day, a retired personnel specialist for the U.S. State Department, said that since 1979 there has been a sharp decline in the number of blacks appointed to policy-making bodies such as the Planning Commission and School Board.

Currently, Day said, only 28 of the 526 people who sit on the city's 60 boards and commissions are black. He recommended that the makeup of all boards reflect the city's 22.3 percent black population.

Council members acknowledged that a problem exists, but attributed it to an apparent reluctance of qualified blacks to apply for the positions. Council member Margaret B. Inman said, "In my case, I treat black people as white people and maybe that's a mistake."

The council promised to explore the situation and received mild applause.

The crowd was later brought to its feet cheering by A. Melvin Miller, former chairman of the city's public housing board.

For more than 30 minutes, Miller assailed the council for what he said was a failure to search for long-term solutions to the finan-

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Blacks List Grievances To Alexandria Council

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cial crisis of the Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing Authority.

He criticized some council members for advocating public housing alternatives such as dispersing low-income families in apartments

throughout the city and issuing housing vouchers, much like food stamps, to subsidize rents for the poor.

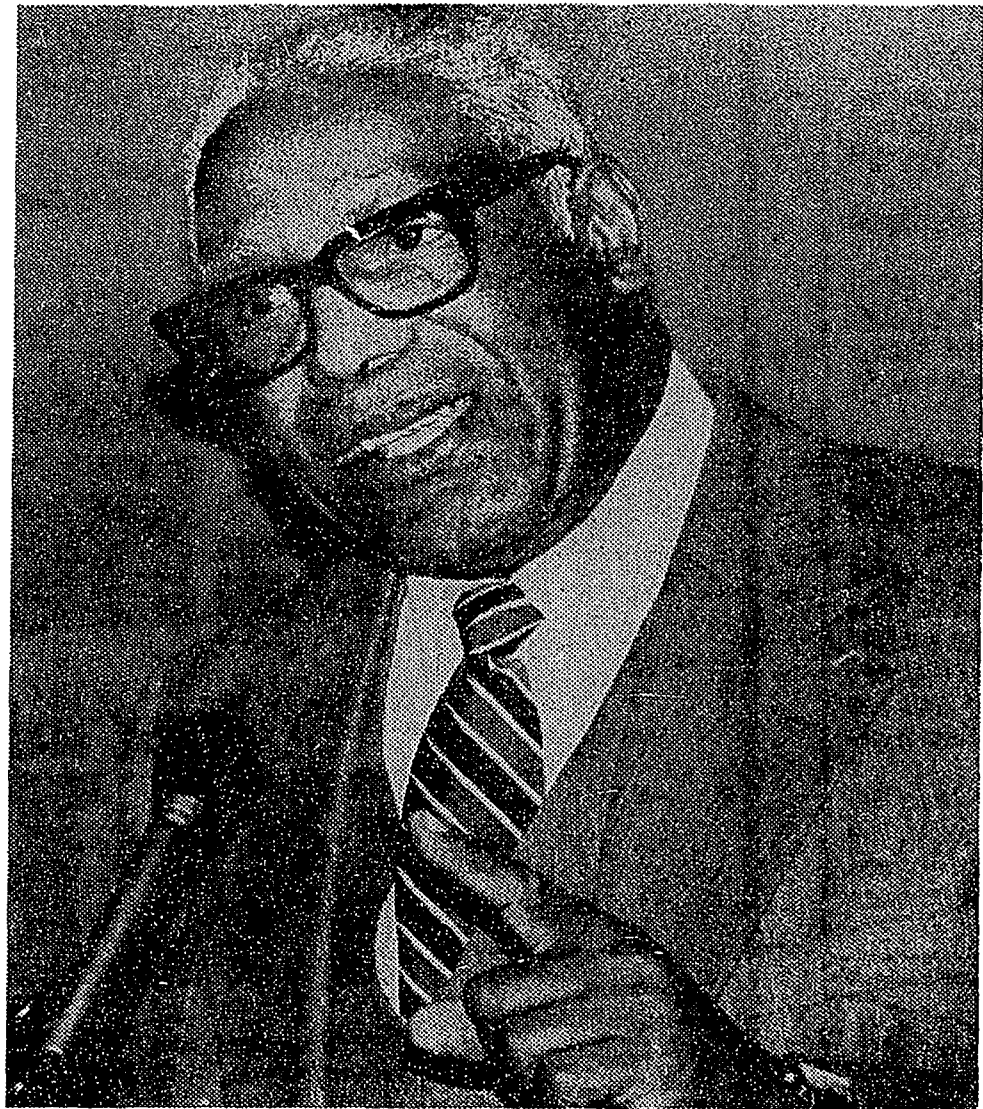
Miller said that if those programs are instituted it will be at the expense of poor, mostly black people, who will have to face for the first time the harsh possibility of being "put out in the street."

Throughout his remarks, parts of the audience cheered and shook placards painted with slogans such as "We Shall Not Be Moved."

Miller said the time has come when politicians can no longer endorse plans to save the housing authority when those plans would destroy it instead.

He suggested that the council set up a task force, including members of the council, the housing authority and tenant groups, to work with U.S. housing officials to seek "real" solutions to Alexandria's public housing crisis.

Mayor Beatley said in response to Miller: "You stole my speech." Other council members did not comment.



By Fred Sweets—The Washington Post
Marion Johnson, one of seven forum members, talks about Alexandria's unemployment.