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The Trust Problem

AT SOME POINT white Memphians and black Memphians are going to have to trust each other. There is no other way to build the kind of community in which both can grow and prosper.

County Commissioner Vasco Smith reduced this city's most serious problem to its simplest form Monday, when he cast his vote against establishing a new consolidation charter commission. Smith said, "It was my intention to just take a long chance and trust people I historically know I can't trust, but I'm going to let my suspicions take over and vote against this resolution."

That same lack of trust is the root cause of this city's inability to build a workable school desegregation plan, an acceptable public housing program, an effective police service, an efficient public hospital system, a political process founded on anything but race, and much more.

The history of these issues in this city and his experiences as a black man and a black political leader suggest that Smith is right to be cautious with his trust. But if the future is to be any different for him and all the rest of us, Smith is wrong to trust not at all. The only answer to mistrust, however valid it may have been, is trust, however risky it may be. The common good can never prevail until one side or the other is given a chance to prove itself.

This is entirely a two-way street. Whites are guilty of the same suspicions and fears, as evidenced by the fate of competent blacks who seek public office in citywide elections. Blacks must be trusted if they are to be expected to trust.

IT IS IRONIC that Smith chose government reform to reveal himself. It was a charter commission established 13 years

ago that brought mayor-council government to Memphis and the first guaranteed black electoral positions in city government. For the POP (Program of Progress) charter to be drafted and approved at the polls, assuring blacks at least three legislative seats where none had existed before, someone had to trust someone.

It was the same through the reappointment and restructuring of county government.

Yet Smith and fellow black commissioners Walter Bailey and Minerva Johnnican vowed to oppose consolidation on grounds that it might be seized by whites as a means to dilute black representation.

Granted, black representation on both local governing bodies may not give blacks an adequate voice in public affairs. But isn't it self-defeating to leave things the way they are? In fact, don't these black politicians doom the black community to the very underrepresentation they profess to fear?

And what will their short-sightedness on the larger questions about consolidation cost their constituents?

Smith, Bailey and Johnnican said they recognized the significant benefits of merging the resources and services of the city and county. Those benefits include strengthening this community's capacity to improve the lot of its most disadvantaged citizens.

BY PRESUPPOSING that a new charter commission would do only the devil's work, Smith and his band have condemned their own worth and influence. If blacks cannot trust these leaders to see that the right kind of people are appointed to a charter commission and that they draft the right kind of new government with the right protections for everyone, who can they trust?