

# COMMISSION ON RACE & ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY

## Minutes

June 24, 2025

### Call to Order and Roll Call

The Commission on Race and Access to Opportunity held its first meeting on June 24, 2025, at 1:00 PM in Room 129 of the Capitol Annex. Senator Amanda Mays Bledsoe, Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

### Present were:

Members: Senator Amanda Mays Bledsoe, Co-Chair; Representative Kevin Jackson, Co-Chair; Senators Karen Berg, Keturah Herron, and Lindsey Tichenor; Representatives George Brown Jr., Samara Heavrin, and Nima Kulkarni; Citizen Members Kimberly Baird and Katima Smith-Willis.

Guests: Ron Busby, Sr., President and Chief Executive Officer, U.S. Black Chambers, Inc.; Larry Forester, Senior Vice President, Forcht Bank; Tyrone Tyra, Senior Vice President - Community and Minority Business Development, Commerce Lexington, Inc.; Robert Quick, President and Chief Executive Officer, Commerce Lexington, Inc.; Carl Brazley, Principal, 7PM Group, LLC; Donovan Taylor, Consultant, Minority Contractors Association of Kentuckiana (MCAK); and Kennedy Dean, Administrative Assistant, MCAK.

LRC Staff: Brandon White and Logan Schaaf.

### Welcoming New Members

Chair Mays Bledsoe welcomed the new members to the commission, including the new Co-Chair, Representative Kevin Jackson.

### Discussion on Challenges Facing Minority Businesses

U.S. Black Chambers, Inc.

Ron Busby, Sr., President and Chief Executive Officer of U.S. Black Chambers, Inc., discussed challenges faced by minority business owners, including inequitable access to resources, financial institutions, education, and networking.

Responding to Senator Herron, Mr. Busby discussed three themes for supporting black owned businesses: intentionality, transparency, and accountability. He also emphasized the importance of using detailed data to find communities most in need of support, and to make sure resources are properly directed.

## Forcht Bank and Commerce Lexington, Inc.

Larry Forester, Senior Vice President of Forcht Bank; Tyrone Tyra, Senior Vice President - Community and Minority Business Development, Commerce Lexington, Inc.; and Robert Quick, President and Chief Executive Officer, Commerce Lexington, Inc., discussed eight challenges facing minority businesses: limited access to capital, reduced access to networks and mentorship, discrimination and bias, bureaucratic hurdles, challenges in branding and visibility, stereotyping, generational business knowledge gaps, and a lack of financial literacy and business acumen. Mr. Forester and Mr. Tyra also detailed some of their programs and initiatives, including: the access loan program, minority business accelerator, opportunity exchange, financial literacy and business education, business recruitment, and partnerships and referral assistance.

Responding to Chair Mays Bledsoe, Mr. Tyra discussed challenges faced by minority businesses when bidding for state contracts, especially in obtaining the necessary certifications to receive certain contracts. Mr. Forester said it is important to have a networking apparatus that puts minority businesses in contact with each other and with state agencies.

Responding to Ms. Smith-Willis, Mr. Forester discussed the vetting process for applicants seeking to present in front of the access loan group, which is made up of 26 lenders. He and Mr. Tyra assist applicants in preparing their proposals before they pitch them to the larger group.

Responding to Co-Chair Jackson, Mr. Tyra provided an overview of education and mentorship efforts. Many business owners who partner with Commerce Lexington go on to become mentors to others who are seeking to do the same. Mr. Forester said he visits high schools to teach students about business and finance.

Responding to Senator Berg, Mr. Tyra and Mr. Forester discussed efforts to expand the reach of the access loan program beyond Fayette County. They also emphasized the potential positive impact of a state program for loans to minority businesses.

Responding to Representative Brown, Mr. Forester detailed the process of turning technical expertise into a business, and the importance of business education in facilitating this process. Mr. Quick discussed the importance of educating young people in entrepreneurship and creating mentorships. Mr. Quick praised Mr. Forester and Mr. Tyra's leadership and also discussed the Black Male Working Academy program.

## 7PM Group, LLC

Carl Brazley, Principal, 7PM Group, LLC, provided an overview of national and state statistics on minority business ownership and reception of federal and state contracts. He also spoke against efforts to remove contracts from minority businesses through litigation. Mr. Brazley said minority businesses do not trail in preparation and certification, but in access to opportunity. He requested that the commission champion legislation that mandates monitoring, tracking, and reporting by a third party entity on the awarding of contracts to minority businesses.

Responding to Senator Herron, Mr. Brazley stated the statistics he provided on federal and state contracts track total dollars spent. General contractors who must make a good faith effort to partner with minority businesses often do not follow through, or they do not provide complete reporting.

Responding to Representative Brown, Mr. Brazley discussed the importance of connections and mentorships in building businesses, and emphasized the relative lack of major companies in Kentucky partnering with minority businesses.

Representative Brown said that there are eminently qualified minority vendors in Kentucky, and that it is a matter of getting work to them.

#### Minority Contractors Association of Kentuckiana

Donovan Taylor, Consultant, Minority Contractors Association of Kentuckiana (MCAK), and Kennedy Dean, Administrative Assistant, MCAK, provided an overview of MCAK's mission, key statistics on minority business ownership, challenges faced by minority contractors, and support initiatives.

Challenges faced by minority contractors include: limited access to capital and financing, barriers to contracting opportunities, limited capacity and technical resources, systemic barriers and discrimination, and limited access to mentorship and business networks.

Mr. Taylor highlighted ongoing support initiatives, particularly the Construction Diversity Accelerator, OneWest's "The Plan Room", partnerships with public agencies and the private sector, workshops and training, and noted recent growth trends and successes.

Mr. Taylor recommended the following policies: increase funding for minority contractors, streamline certification processes, implement contract set-asides, and enhance data transparency and reporting.

Senator Berg expressed disappointment with recent actions by the General Assembly

relating to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

Mr. Taylor emphasized the importance of enhancing support for local and small businesses.

Chair Mays Bledsoe thanked the MCAK for their work and collaboration with the commission.

Representative Brown said that greed, incompetence, and corruption are the sources of many of the problems the commission is seeking to address.

### **Adjournment**

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 2:45 PM.