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Understand North Omaha's past to chart the best course for the future

By Preston Love Jr

As a native of Omaha with years of accumulated wisdom as to the plight of my beloved race, I have a responsibility to speak up during these tumultuous times. I do not have the right, however, to speak for my community. I am observing a tremendous surge of activism and conversation among black Omahans, from our elected officials and organizational leaders to our lay leaders and, most importantly, our young leaders. Those conversations are intersectional, intergenerational and healthy. The next generation is demanding to take the lead. I am impressed and take my place as an elder, not as a spokesman, available for counsel.

I, too, know and believe that Black Lives Matter. We jointly demand radical criminal justice change and new policing practices and policies, for we are in complete solidarity with specific recommendations emerging.

Today, I want to focus on another aspect of transformational change: strategic investment in our communities of color.

North Omaha for decades was a segregated, redlined and intentionally economically deprived black section of the city. Blacks migrated north from the Deep South to escape overt racism and to find work opportunities.

Omaha's expansive meatpacking houses provided work, to the ire and hate of whites who wanted all the jobs. We were villainized, neglected, even lynched and murdered. We were underemployed and lacked financial resources. We were redlined — physically, financially, geographically and psychologically.

The Greater Omaha community adopted the narrative that blacks were inferior. As time passed, we were repeatedly reminded of our appointed station by banks, Realtors, employers, public school systems and teachers. "Stay in your place" was the term used by all.

Yet, we had a secret weapon. We had strong and influential clergy, a rich culture, a determined resolve, segregated brilliant black educators, vibrant commerce and stable family structures. The World-Herald book "24th and Glory," published last year, chronicles North Omaha's unbelievable and incredible reservoir of talent that emerged from the mid-20th century.

As time passed, North Omaha experienced a talent and brain drain, where our best and brightest escaped Omaha to find other places to manifest their potential. Many stayed but fled to West Omaha. North Omaha was left with poverty, drained in talent, stripped of wealth and brains, without a tax base and faced daily with villainization, racism and bigotry. Our neighborhood was split by a freeway and blocked off by a hotel. With the police murder of innocent 14-year-old Vivian Strong in 1969, the city erupted in violence, leaving North Omaha in decay and economic chaos. This is the picture of systemic racism.

Since the 1960s, the North Omaha community has had no beneficial (strategic) investments. The lack of investment has produced the health disparities, mass incarceration, educational gaps (and separate but unequal school districts), biased policing, voter suppression and wealth disparities that plague our community today.

Meanwhile, downtown skyline thrives, Midtown Crossing grows, the west sprawls, while heavy investment in north downtown dominates. Yet, North Omaha suffers from a generation of little investment and a lack of cultural sensitivity. Even as subtle economic growth and development begins in North Omaha, black contractors and businesses do not benefit.

We are angry and demand change. We are sick and tired of racist acts against our community members. We continue to mourn Minnesota's George Floyd, and many other blacks struck down. We are hurt by the death of young James Scurlock. Yes, we call for justice but we also call for strategic investment into North Omaha.

An Omaha native, Malcolm X, said plainly, the black man can do something to "give himself an independent economy" and "provide job opportunities for himself." We call for strategic investment into North Omaha.

In last week's column, I called for the full community to listen first, then to learn and to act only on the recommendations coming from the communities affected. Join us in creating long-awaited changes including my focus, strategic investment into North Omaha.