



## JOSEPH "JOE" JOHNSON

### A TRIBUTE TO A FAITHFUL PUBLIC SERVANT

By

Former Council Member and Mayor Earnestine D. Pittman

People will often celebrate a person for being the "first" in every walk of life. There is nothing wrong with that, someone has to be. The significance of that someone becomes memorable and important if the someone makes it memorable and important. Joseph "Joe" Johnson did exactly that. I want to share my memories and knowledge of my friend Joe Johnson with people who can appreciate what it means to be a FAITHFUL PUBLIC SERVANT.

Joe Johnson became the first Black City Manager of the City of East Point in 1982 when the City had an all-White Mayor and City Council. The only vocal and visible Black political presence was that of longtime resident, James "Jim" Jackson. Joe was not born, reared, or educated in Georgia. When he moved to East Point, there was no Black political organization to support Joe. East Point was almost at the end of White flight with a fast-growing Black majority. He had to prove his worth on his own. He had the temperament, knowledge, people skills, integrity, and tenacity to do the job, and he did it very well.

Joe was able to work effectively with the all-White Mayor and Council for many reasons:

1. From every perspective, he was prepared for the job.
2. He was frugal with his own money and applied that to the spending of City funds. He was not wasteful, nor did he abuse his access to the City's resources to enrich anyone except the City.
3. He was a listener, and a great communicator to his Staff and the residents.
4. He did not use his position to gain political favors.
5. He was not vengeful, nor did he carry grudges.
6. He was nobody's fool!

He kept abreast of what was happening within the communities. When I organized a community group to protest drugs access in Stanton Road Public

Housing on Fridays, City Manager Joe Johnson sent in the Police Red Dog Swat Team to protect us on our third protest because he learned of a threat on my life. I had not informed the Police Department of our planned protests, and our group had never encountered any drug dealers that we knew of. The Swat Team informed me that some of our clean-cut supporters from outside of our group were indeed involved with drug deals in the public housing complex.

On another occasion, City Manager Joe Johnson went to bat for another group that I organized, East Point Action Committee (EPAC). EPAC consisted of me, my husband, Melvin; Bobby and Mary Berry; and Gloria Jenkins. We were all transplants and had lived in the City less than ten years. We organized to get rid of the all-at-Large voting structure. While East Point was trending toward a majority Black population especially in two Wards, we were unable to elect a Black candidate from either of the two Wards. So, we approached City Manager Joe Johnson, stated our case and the desire to have the Justice Department to intervene. He listened and asked us to allow him to work with the Mayor and Council and appropriate personnel including the Justice Department if needed. He did and the Mayor and Council voted to change the all-at-Large Wards to four Local Wards, and four at-Large Wards with elections held every two years. This showed the respect and high esteem that the Mayor and Council had for City Manager Joe Johnson. It also showed the progressive thinking of the Mayor and Council.

City Manager Joe Johnson provided the necessary leadership that was needed for a City in financial transition from previously being the sixth largest industrial City in the State to a City with closing factories; a stagnant Downtown district; and a population in transition from majority White to majority Black. This was done in a peaceful manner with no racial disruptions. City Manager Joe Johnson served his City as a true Public Servant.

After leaving the employment of the City, Joe continued to serve his City as an active resident with the same attributes demonstrated during his employment with the City. When I was elected as a Council Member and later as Mayor, Joe became my mentor, advisor, and sparring partner. When I was Mayor, and I could not get the Council to support my veto of a Budget that contained Ordinances in the Budget Workbook (not the Budget Ordinance) that had not been presented to

the Council for adoption and clearly violated our Charter, resident Joe Johnson organized the East Point Citizens for Change, LLC and filed a lawsuit with four residents. I agreed to join the lawsuit on the condition that the Group would not serve the City until after the City's election that was three months away. Joe, being frugal, got the Group to agree. After the City's election, I gained the support of two of the new Council Members and the Ordinances in the Budget Workbook were repealed.

On another occasion, resident Joe Johnson was instrumental in spearheading a class action lawsuit against the City for charges by the Electric Utility. During discovery of the original charge that the City failed to include the residents in a \$40 million Refund from MEAG over ten years; the Court was given a copy of an Ordinance that allowed the City to collect \$34 million in extra Electric Utility fees. Although according to Court documents, the City was unable to provide a single Council Agenda that the Ordinance was ever presented to the Council; not a single copy of Council Minutes ever contained the Ordinance; not a single tape or video of recorded Council Meetings contained any mention of the Ordinance; and not a single Mayor or Council voted for the Ordinance, Judge Kelly Lee Ellerbe ruled in favor of the City stating that the Ordinance was voted on in the Budget. The Ordinance was in the Budget Workbook, not the Budget Ordinance that was presented to Mayor and Council.

City Manager Joe Johnson and resident Joe Johnson knew the Charter, Related Ordinances, and Policies. Manager Joe Johnson was never accused of violating the City Charter or Related Ordinances and Policies. Why did I go into such detail about these two lawsuits? All East Point residents need to know that Joe Johnson was not grandstanding or seeking attention by filing two frivolous lawsuits. The two filed lawsuits represented serious violations of our Charter and our form of governance. He was standing up for the rule of law which he believed to be the bedrock of all governmental entities. Below is a copy of the section of the City Charter that justified Joe's beliefs.

**East Point City Charter clearly states: Sec. 2-207. Form of legislation.**

- (a) Every official act of the city council having the force and effect of law shall be by ordinance. All other actions of the city council shall be by resolution.

- (b) Every proposed ordinance shall be introduced in writing and in the form required for final adoption. Each ordinance which involves lengthy documents not included within the body of such ordinance shall include a reference to such documents.
- (c) No ordinance shall contain more than one subject matter, which subject shall be clearly expressed in the title of the ordinance.
- (d) The enacting clause shall be "Be it ordained by the city council of East Point...".
- (e) Any ordinance which repeals or amends an existing ordinance or part of the city code shall set forth the ordinance sections or subsections to be repealed or amended.
- (f) An ordinance may be introduced by any councilmember at any regular meeting of the city council or at any special meeting at which an ordinance may be lawfully considered and adopted.
- (g) Each ordinance shall be read by title at two different regular meetings of the city council unless such reading be waived by affirmative vote of no less than two-thirds (2/3) of the council members present at any meeting of the city council duly convened at which a quorum is present; provided, however, that any zoning ordinance, assessing ordinance, or any other ordinance requiring a public hearing shall not be finally adopted until after such ordinance has been properly advertised and a public hearing held thereon.

(Ord. No. 016-11, 8-1-11)

(016-11, § 1, 8-1-11)

It has been a great honor and privilege to know and work with Joseph "Joe" Johnson as a City Manager and resident. It has been an even greater honor and privilege to call Joe Johnson, my friend. Even when his health started to really decline, Joe was still fighting for his City at Council Meetings; through emails; and financially helping with my Newsletters and flyers to residents. Of all the people in East Point, Joe Johnson had the greatest impact on my view of what government ought to be. He was indeed a Faithful Public Servant. May he forever rest in peace!