



A Vision for Atlanta

An Interview with The Honorable Kasim Reed, Mayor of Atlanta

EDITORS' NOTE Kasim Reed was inaugurated as Atlanta's 59th Mayor in January 2010. Prior to his election, he established a track record of leadership during his 11 years as a member of the Georgia General Assembly. He was first elected in 1998 as a State Representative and served two terms. From 2002 to 2009, he was a member of the Georgia State Senate, where he was Vice Chairman of the Senate Democratic Caucus. Reed was appointed as Howard



The Hon. Kasim Reed

University's youngest General Trustee in June 2002 and remains a member of the Board of Trustees. He is Chair of the Transportation and Communications Committee of the U.S. Conference of Mayors and Chair of the Regional Transit Committee of the Atlanta Regional Commission. He is a member of the Leadership Georgia Class of 2000 and Leadership Atlanta Class of 1998, and was named to the Aspen Institute-Rodel Fellowship Class of 2007. Reed's civic leadership and service have been nationally recognized on programs such as Meet the Press, The Charlie Rose Show, and John King USA. He has been featured in publications including The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and Black Enterprise. Reed is a graduate of Howard University, where he received his Bachelor of Arts and Juris Doctor degrees. In March, he received an honorary Doctor of Laws from his alma mater. He is a former partner of the international law firm, Holland & Knight LLP.

How did Atlanta fare through the recent economic crisis?

We lost 54,000 jobs in the construction sector, which has been tough.

We have a very well-run state and my predecessor was a strong mayor that made some gut-wrenching decisions to keep the city on strong fiscal footing. The state of Georgia did the same thing, though we would be better off if we had made more investments in education. But the state is one of eight in the country with a Triple A bond rating by all three major rating agencies. Everything that I see and feel suggests that we're at the bottom of the 'U' and we're flattening out, and will start to move in a favorable direction in the next 12 to 18 months.

With local governments across the country facing difficult budget issues, what plans do you have for keeping Atlanta on steady footing?

I came into office 15 months ago. My administration recently delivered our second budget proposal and it was balanced without a property tax increase. Every other comparable government in Georgia faces substantial deficits. Last year, during my first term, I took on reforming the city of Atlanta's pension system, and passed a schedule of changes for all new employees. It helped me deliver a balanced budget last year and allowed me to hire more police, give a raise to public safety personnel, and make critical investments in young people. I'm now working on pension reform for existing employees.

You have been focused on creating new opportunities for the city's youth. How successful have those efforts been?

Those young people were once me. My parents divorced when I was 13 and having structure in my life was essential to my outcome. As someone who came through the public schools, I often wonder if a public school kid born today could grow up to be the mayor of this city 40 years from now. The reality is that it's not very likely. So I want to make sure kids have the opportunities I had. For instance, the previous administration closed two-thirds of the public recreation centers in the city due to budget constraints. With the support of the Atlanta City Council, I reopened all of the centers within my first year in office. But we didn't just reopen the recreation centers: we opened them across the span of four quarters in an even fashion and we made sure we could afford to keep them open. We didn't play games with the community. We've also gotten a lot of corporate and philanthropic support. We have enlisted the Boy & Girls Clubs and the YMCA to assist with programming. Coca-Cola has put up more than one million dollars for the recreation centers, which I have named "Centers of Hope." We're providing tutoring, technology training, and a safe haven with increased security for kids. Other companies have stepped up too. Converse, for example, is funding modern basketball courts.

You've had strong results in improving public safety, a challenging area for many

mayors. How have you been able to achieve this when others are cutting back?

I said I was going to create the largest police force in Atlanta's history and I'm going to achieve that objective. And I'm not going to use a tough budget as an excuse to not do it. For 20 years, folks here have been saying we needed a 2,000-person police force; we're now just 150 officers away from that. We gave the police officers and fire fighters the first step increase they've had in more than three years at a time when I was facing a \$40-million deficit. In a down economy, if a city loses its safety component, the time it will take to get up to speed when the economy recovers will be even more protracted. Capital goes where it is needed and stays where it is well cared for. If we were dealing with a crime problem in the middle of this economy, when capital was ready to come off the sidelines, it would not come to Atlanta. So at a time when other cities are laying off police officers, we've hired 330 police officers in 15 months.

As mayor, how critical was it for you to reach out to the business community early on to make sure the public/private partnership was strong as you addressed many of these needs?

During my campaign, I was in third place for 18 out of the 22 months of the campaign. I wrote a letter to the Atlanta Committee for Progress – a group which consists of 20 CEOs of publicly traded companies – telling them even before I was elected that I wanted them to stay on board because of how much I value them, even though more than 80 percent of them did not support my candidacy. I learned early that no matter where people stand during campaigns, you can't govern without a strong relationship with the business community. So as soon as the election is over, you have to make sure you engage the corporate community.

You have attracted many top level people into the administration. If I were talking to some of them without you in the room and I asked what it was like to work for Mayor Reed, what would they say?

Results are what matter to me and I don't believe in playing small ball. We've all sacrificed a great deal to be here and holding a high public office is a special honor, so you have to make the most of every single moment of it. ●