

Health care and investing in infrastructure are next on the agenda for Mayor Kasim Reed

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By Maria Saporta

Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed continues to enjoy solid support from a leading group of metro business leader serving on the Atlanta Committee for Progress.

The group met Monday morning when they discussed the mayor's next steps for his administration — efforts that the business community has been willing to lend their financial and influential support.

"There's been consistent support for what's going to make a difference long term in the quality of life of the city," said Jim Hannan, CEO of Georgia-Pacific Corp. who is new chair of the Atlanta Committee for Progress.

The topics of conversation at Monday's meeting, which is closed to press, were about the financial state of the city and its infrastructure needs going forward.

High on the agenda is getting the city's health care costs under control for both employees and retirees. Reed said the city has 7,000 employees, and there were 2,000 emergency room visits in the past year (an expensive way of getting health care).

Health care costs have grown 12 percent a year. For example, the retiree health care costs have gone from \$19 million to \$40 million between 2008 and 2011. "We know that 12 percent (annual) growth is not sustainable," Reed said in an interview after the meeting while sitting in Hannan's office at the downtown Georgia-Pacific building.

The city now is looking to do health care reform in a similar way that it handled pension reform. For pensions, the business community raised \$1.6 million to hire a team of outside advisors to study and present the options.

Now the mayor is asking the business community to do the same for health care — raise money so they can hire professional advisors to do a thorough analysis on the city's benefits for employees and retirees.

"We are raising \$1 million," Reed said. "As of today, we have raised \$800,000. At the end of this month, we will have raised the \$1 million."

The mayor also told ACP that the Municipal Option Sales Tax (MOST) had passed with an 86 percent approval from voters. He said the campaign to pass MOST cost about \$500,000, and members of ACP donated about \$150,000 of that.

"Sometimes I think my job is beggar in chief," Reed said, adding that he is grateful for the generosity he has received from the Atlanta business community.

Fixing the city's aging infrastructure also is a point of concern. The mayor said the city has a \$922 million backlog to satisfy its infrastructure needs for roads, bridges and sidewalks. Currently, the mayor is exploring a variety of ways to raise the dollars needed to fix the city's infrastructure.

In the Monday interview, Reed also said he is "doubling arts funding" during this year's city budget to help out the city's "struggling" arts organizations.

Duriya Farooqui, the city's chief operating officer, said funding for the arts would go from \$250,000 to \$500,000.

Reed also restated how important it is for his administration to have the Atlanta Committee for Progress advising him and being ready to help depending on the city's needs.

The committee has been in place since it was established by Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin in 2003. Reed told the group when he was running for mayor that he would follow in Franklin's footsteps and continue to seek their advice.

"My vision was that if I were fortunate enough to win, I wanted the Atlanta Committee for Progress to stay in place," Reed said.