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Southern Christian Leadership Conference
of Southern California

July 27, 2022

Honorable Nury Martinez
President, Los Angeles City Council
City Hall
200 N Spring Street, Ste. 470
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Dear Council President Martinez:

Greetings and we pray this letter finds you well.

We wanted to communicate our feelings concerning your characterization of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference – So. Cal. defense of voting rights and the organization's insistence that you and the City Council abide by the Charter and obey the rule of law.

In the *Los Angeles Daily News* article dated July 19, 2022, you questioned the motivation of the So. Cal. affiliate of the national civil rights organization founded by the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. You reportedly said, "It's wrong that a group of individuals with suspect agendas are working to keep over 250,000 residents from having representation on this Council." You have claimed that "the residents of the 10th District wanted Herb Wesson" and asserted that "SCLC continues to fight for the seat to remain vacant until Councilmember Ridley-Thomas returns."

Well, there is absolutely nothing suspect about our agenda.

We simply support representation that is accountable to CD10 voters. We support the rule of law and adherence to the City Charter. We know you can understand, as you are a very passionate advocate yourself. We simply support the treasure of voting rights and oppose the nullification of elections masquerading as maintenance of public trust and confidence in a Council and City government awash in legal controversy, scandal and conflicts of interest. This is especially the

case when those efforts rely on legal advice from a City Attorney's office under investigation by the same U.S. Attorney's Office that has indicted Councilmember Ridley-Thomas. We simply support due process, the presumption of innocence and transparency. It is in the history of our organization to fight for voting rights and community wherever community rights might be in jeopardy.

We should not have to remind those who are involved, that SCLC is a leading proponent of the historic struggle to make the franchise real for millions of African American voters, women and men, who were denied for generations the indispensable tool of civic engagement—the right to exercise the right to vote. SCLC uses every tool available in its arsenal, including nonviolent direct action, in its advocacy of accountable representation. Women played significant organizational roles, though largely unpublicized, in this effort.

The women associated with SCLC will not be silent in response to attempts to denigrate our organization's efforts to defend voting rights and resist nullification of our votes. We recognize that the ability to vote for the candidate of our choice is the prerequisite to accountable representation and a fundamental tenet of representative democracy. There should be nothing "suspect" about demanding reinstatement of a constituency's duly elected representative, especially when the decision to suspend him and revoke his pay and benefits was discretionary and the process used to do so fails basic tests of due process, evidence, common courtesy and respect.

At the core of who we are, our goal is to redeem "the soul of America" through nonviolent community action and accountability. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was established in 1957 to coordinate the action of local community. We are here for this purpose.

Any practice or activity that appears or is anti-democratic and disrespects the voice and voting power of the people is of great concern to us. We feel this is the case with CD10, Mark Ridley-Thomas (MR-T) and city voters. Your claim that it is we who are denying CD10 voters representation is far from what we are standing for. Nothing in the City Charter mandated that you suspend MR-T. To do so — before his arraignment, before the evidence was made known to him, before he entered a plea of not guilty — and without talking to him or permitting him a hearing, is reminiscent of the worst practices in the old Jim Crow South. We remember these practices as they have been a fluid historical reference in our struggle.

CD10 voters have been disenfranchised. Votes have been nullified, the jury pool tainted and, most of all, the fundamental due process rights to a public official with a 30 year record of service were violated. This is our concern.

In calling for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to assemble, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in January 1957, “because we have no moral choice, before God, but to delve deeper into the struggle—and to do so with greater reliance on nonviolence and with greater unity, coordination, sharing and Christian understanding.”

We are delving deeper. And in some type of way, we know you can feel and understand this.

The perpetration of falsehoods about “suspect agendas” and “working to keep over 250,000 residents from having representation” must stop. They reflect the pernicious impact of Trumpism on the body politic and are unbecoming to the soul of our community. These macro - aggressions dishonor the leadership role of women of color and the legacy of female leaders who truly seek out every opportunity to allow the moral compass of justice to prevail and lead the way. This moral compass will lead to a more honest governing style.

If you remember, the 1963 “Birmingham Manifesto” explained the Black community’s decision to act. “We act today in full concert with our Hebraic-Christian tradition, the laws of morality and the Constitution of our nation.”

We still stand on this Manifesto. It is a part of our fabric to act and struggle for decency, morality, self-respect, and human dignity.

We cannot afford to mimic or repeat the woes, actions, style or rhetoric of the ill-leadership of our past. We must move forward with greater hope and healing.

Two of the five CD10 resident voter plaintiffs in the suit challenging the legality of your appointee to the City Council include women.

They possess long histories of civil rights, community activism and empowerment activities. Mary Lee, Esq. of Leimert Park is a former member of the SCLC board in Los Angeles. Joy Atkinson of Jefferson Park is the founder to Los Angeles African American Women’s Political Institute (LAAAWPI). Each was a signatory to an October 29, 2021 letter expressing “shock and horror attributed to your hasty action to suspend Councilmember Ridley-Thomas.” They pleaded with you

to “reverse course.” You rebuffed this effort. You subsequently made no documented public effort to convene them to share your plans to address their appeal for representation during the 100+ days CD10 went without voting representation before the legally dubious appointment of Herb Wesson.

We know you reached out privately to several women of your choice before settling on Mr. Wesson. They refused your entreaty. They did not wish to be a party to the disenfranchising, nullifying effect of an increasingly obvious self-serving effort to secure a favorable vote for your agenda. Then, when you introduced the motion to appoint Mr. Wesson, you opposed a one week continuance to provide time for the Council and public to receive a City Attorney opinion and assess the legality of his eligibility.

So that we are clear: there is a better way. Whatever consultation you engaged in with 10th District constituents was at best highly selective; at worst highly secretive. You did not even extend the courtesy of soliciting the opinion of the incumbent, duly elected, presumptively innocent, Councilmember Ridley-Thomas about your choice.

This is a civil rights issue.

Let us be mindful, by failing to place any conditions on Wesson’s appointment, you have permitted him to preside over the rapid exodus of a very diverse, talented and committed staff of public servants assembled by the presumptively innocent Councilmember Ridley-Thomas, many of whom were highly credentialed women of color in leading policy roles. What does this say about the commitment to diversity and the promotion of women? How can we imagine this in a better way?

Like the action to suspend Councilmember Ridley-Thomas, you have sought to minimize public input on a decision of immense consequence. By holding a Council vote quickly and (in the case of Wesson’s appointment) the motion was considered on the Tuesday following the three day President’s Day holiday weekend. It came with full knowledge of the court challenge that would result in the first of two temporary restraining orders.

A strong case can be made that the decision to suspend was to eliminate a political adversary and to appoint a supplicant. Even the *LA Times* characterized it as “back room deal.” You used the ambiguities in the Charter associated with the Council’s power to “suspend” a member and make a “temporary appointment” to

appoint a known ally. In the process, by permitting the revocation of MR-T's pay, you tried to damage his ability to finance his legal defense while simultaneously tainting the jury pool with widely covered adverse publicity.

Councilmember Ridley-Thomas has performed exemplary service in the thirty years he has been in office. He has never been charged with any criminal activity. The physical landscape bears the imprint of his work from the Martin Luther King, Jr. hospital campus and the Crenshaw-LAX light rail project, to the L.A. County Museum of Art, Park to Playa Trail, and Exposition Park.

The founder of the African American Voter Registration, Education and Participation Project (AAVREP), the Empowerment Congress and Days of Dialogue, he has been instrumental in efforts to encourage civic engagement and nonviolent democratic participation by the public. His work inspired establishment of neighborhood councils to ensure greater local participation in land use and constituent service decision-making. According to the Registrar Recorder-County Clerk's office, AAVREP has registered approximately 200,000 voters, mainly in South Los Angeles, since its founding in 2002. MR-T has been a leading advocate of multi-racial, inter-community collaboration. He brings thoughtful, progressive perspectives to policy discussions and seeks to understand the intersectionality of the social and economic problems we confront, particularly their impact on women. He is the only public official to address the impact of the *Dobbs* Supreme Court decision on the reproductive health and welfare of homeless women, for example.

Ubuntu is Swahili for "We See You".

We see you.

Blaming CD10 constituents and SCLC-SC for the lack of accountable representation is like blaming newly emancipated Blacks in the South for fighting for freedom and equality. WE have evaluated the situation and have an alternative approach to your failed leadership of the Council. We call on you to engage us in a discussion about 1.) reinstatement of MR-T; 2.) restoration of MR-T's pay and benefits; and 3.) support for Charter reforms that guarantee a transparent suspension and temporary appointment process.

We hope you will not dismiss these appeals. We look forward to engaging you further in our advocacy of truth and justice.

Respectfully,

PASTOR THEMBEKILA COLEMAN SMART

PASTOR MARY MINOR

SYLVIA DREW IVIE

RABBI HEATHER MILLER

CAROLYN WEBB de MACIAS

PASTOR NAJUMA SMITH POLLARD