

The Lord indeed works in mysterious ways. But it is good work and never late. Yes, it appears that the “drought” in federal procurement for the Gulf Rebuilding is about to end for small, minority businesses.

We had been fighting a laissez-faire attitude of the leadership of Congress.

An attitude that turned deaf ears on the complaints and frustrations of locally based businesses trying to apply their skills to all of the opportunities generated from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the failure of the levee system maintained by the US Army Corps of Engineers.

Halliburton and all of the big boys at the “country club” came roaring in and jumped on the procurement “troughs” like 500 pound hogs.

Malfeasance, greed, fudging, price fixing and all things that are supposed to be anathema to Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR) entered into the mainstream and to the detriment and destruction of hard working, local businesses of all ethnicities.

These affected businesses are basically small with the highest percentage of Black ownership in the nation.

We advocates had to regroup and concentrate on procurement opportunities at the state, county and city levels.

We have entrenched our businesses under the federal “radar”.

But now it appears that the walls are going to tumble down.

Last fall,
America
made a major upgrade in the leadership of Congress.

We now have new Chairs at the committee and subcommittee levels.

One significant change is the rise of Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez (D-Brooklyn) as Chair of the House Small Business Committee.

It's the wake up call for the good 'ol boys.

There is indeed a “new sheriff” in town and things will no longer be the same.

On April 12, Chairwoman Velazquez held a Congressional Hearing in
New Orleans

She demanded and got the presence of Steven Preston, Administrator of the Small Business Administration; Lurita Doan, Administrator of the US General Services Administration; Paul

Schneider, Under Secretary for Management of the US Department of Homeland Security; Dr. James I. Finley, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Technology; Lt. General Carl A. Strock, Commander and Chief of Engineers, US Army Corps of Engineers; and Admiral Patrick Dunne, Assistant Secretary for Policy, Planning, and Preparedness, US Department of Veterans Affairs.

They gave testimony as to the “Participation of Small Businesses in Hurricane Katrina Recovery Contracts”.

She and the other participating members of the Committee listened to the agencies intently.

When they finished she berated them fiercely.

She accused them of phony numbers in their reports.

She detested that they were trying to “paint a nice picture of what’s going on”. She stated “The truth is that there is no more than 7% of the contracts going to small business – 50% of which is less than \$100,000 per contract.”

She presented documentation of false entries of companies that were not based in the Gulf nor were small.

She made it clear that a lot of games were being played and the time for those games to end is now.

Congresswoman Velazquez and the Committee hammered them for two straight hours.

Congressman William Jefferson noted that the “SBA had a staff of 30 for the New Orleans District Office but now that staff has been reduced to 9”.

He identified Black firms who had existing contracts prior to Katrina but had them canceled and their employees, mostly African Americans, all fired and replaced by a division of Halliburton who hired new people at drastically reduced rates.

These agencies were verbally reduced to what they have become – socially economic failures to the communities of the Gulf.

The Chairwoman made it very clear to the agencies that things must drastically change for the better immediately.

She demanded that each of the agencies develop 5 significant contracts for small minority businesses in the SBA 8a within the next 30 days as evidence of a change.

She put them on notice that the Committee will be monitoring all future activities intensely and will not tolerate any furtherance of exclusion.

After admonishing the federal agencies, she called forward 5 small business owners who testified as to their frustrating experiences with those agencies.

It was real life scenarios of discrimination, neglect and detrimental treatment.

They told it all for the next hour and a half.

I haven't seen such strength and leadership coming from the House Small Business Committee since the great Parren J. Mitchell.

The fire, passion and sincerity were clear and transmitted to those who are supposed to follow the law.

She knows her power and will use it to make things right. Small, local and minority owned firms based in Louisiana are going to finally get their fair chance at federal procurement.

Thank you Congresswoman Velazquez!

We stand with you.