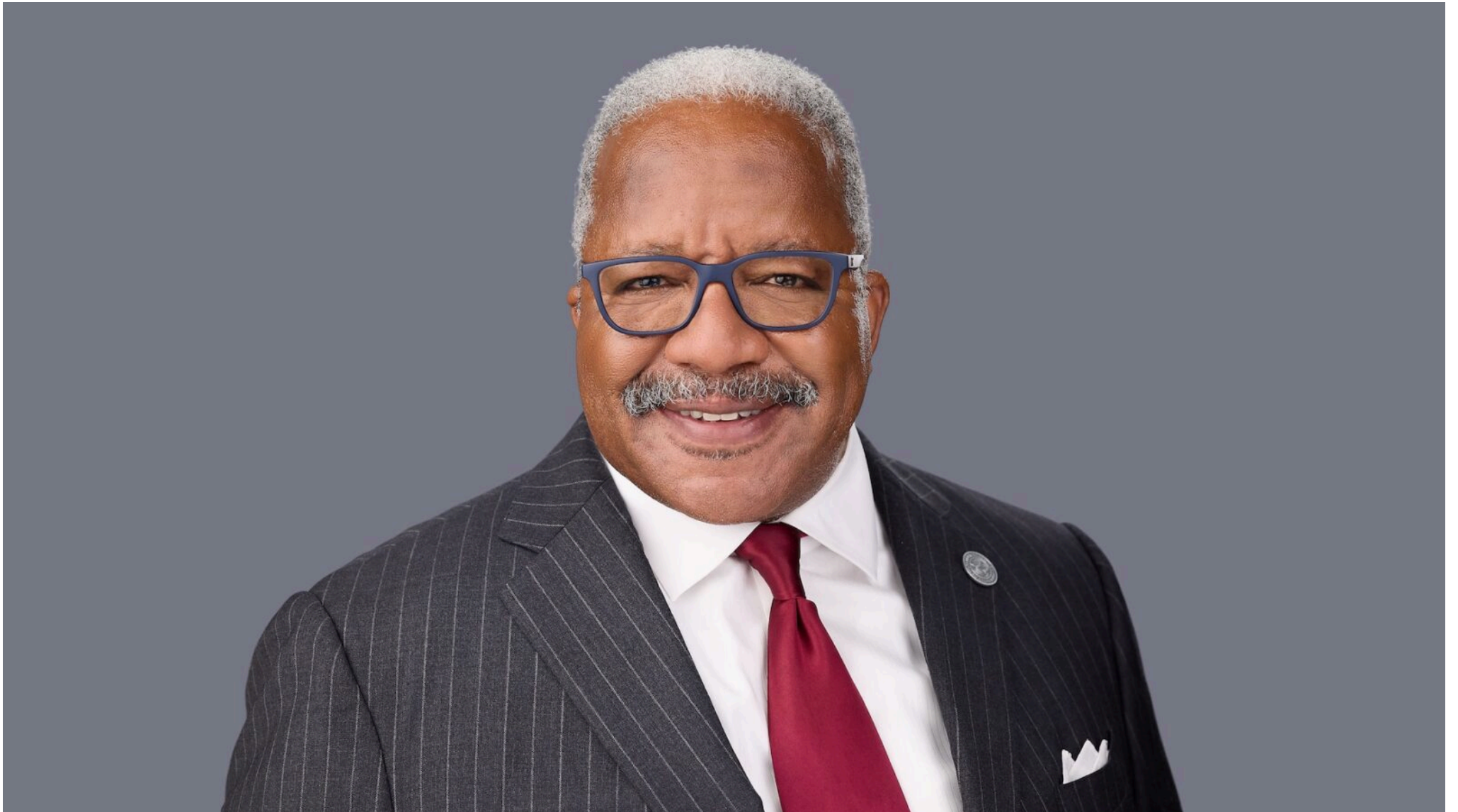


The rush to West Palm Beach, the model city that makes America dream

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IN THE NEWS

Photo Keith James © Lauren Lieberman / LILA PHOTO

In just a few years, West Palm Beach has methodically created a community of opportunity for all in Florida. Under the leadership of its charismatic mayor, Keith James, everyone has their place in the sun and can aspire to the American dream. The United States of the future is being played out here with this shift in the economic and societal center of gravity. Meet a visionary America didn't see coming.

By **Sabah Kaddouri**

In the shade of the palm trees, the perfectly maintained streets allow pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists to coexist harmoniously. A beautiful sun shines its rays on the residents who are busy or taking their time between two colorful shops. In the background, the azure of the Atlantic Ocean. Students, entrepreneurs, athletes, mothers, retirees... Everyone rushes into their daily lives, serene and confident. In West Palm Beach, they have found a promise that speaks to natives and dreamers alike: *A Community of Opportunity for All*. Powerful words that are concretely appreciated by these Americans from all walks of life united around this beautiful formula. America loves slogans but hates, even more, lies, broken promises. Beware those who play with its trust! One determined man has managed to become a politician, doctor, CEO, pioneer, police officer, father, best friend, and more. Mayor Keith James, elected to lead West Palm Beach in 2019, has transformed the face of a once-battered city into a model city for the United States. And for the world.



Before settling into this seat, the territory symbolized all the ills of a society in peril: insecurity, disaffection among young people, almost zero investment, unsanitary conditions, West Palm Beach stood out in contrast to its affluent neighbor, Palm Beach. Cruel geographical inevitability... The county with the highest concentration of billionaires in the world, home to the most powerful man in the world, Donald Trump, suffered a double whammy while looking from afar at the gleaming postcard of a triumphant America. Uncle Sam also loves good stories, happy endings, and the more desperate the case—borrowing from David and Goliath—the better! West Palm Beach's salvation came somewhere in Wichita, Kansas. A state at the antipodes of Florida's gentleness and its global magnetism. Keith James, the providential man, was born thousands of kilometers away in a segregated America. Fate also wanted it to be the fruit of adolescent carelessness.

" My mother was barely 17 when she had me. She had just graduated and started her university education. A good student, she fell in love with her exact opposite. I was raised by this wonderful single mother who, despite the difficulties, never sought to denigrate the absent father figure. She was forced to stop her studies to work as a cleaner for a wealthy family. She always taught me that education was the key to success. You know, when you are the child, the only son, of a single mother, there is one thing you refuse to be: your mother's biggest disappointment. That was my biggest fear. From an early age, all I knew was that I wanted to make her proud, " confides Keith James.

To understand the mayor, one must summon the child, the past. Investigate the genesis of this thirst for exemplary success. Even if politics came late, and moreover by chance, there is something obvious in his life path. It was only a matter of time. Very early on, little Keith displayed academic abilities above the fray. He read a lot, also understood that he had to invest twice as much as a white classmate. There was consideration of making him skip grades, but his mother refused this prospect. Soon, the excellent results combined with her son's impeccable behavior forced a difficult decision on the family: to leave the school reserved for African Americans for an exclusively white establishment. At 8 or 9 years old, Keith James was thrown into the unknown. His compass, however, did not change since his mother would always be proud of him. One day, he experienced a particularly painful episode that would mark him for life. He had to make the decision not to join his Black friends who had gone to demonstrate. Of course, he wanted to see an end to the segregationist regime , *which was so incompatible with the democratic values of the United States! However, not going to school meant betraying his mother and hurting her feelings. "Despite the pressure, I didn't boycott school. I was overwhelmed with emotion and burst into tears. It was a heavy burden for a twelve-year-old child to bear...* ", the elected official recalled when asked about the first part of his life.

He doesn't know it yet, but little Keith is developing interpersonal skills that will be crucial for the rest of his career. He'll be able to adapt to all environments, build consensus while defending his opinions. He'll take the plunge like a leader knows how.



PBSC-Palm Beach State College President Ava C ©

Another step would finish shaping him for the future: his brilliant studies at Harvard. He chose law and specialized in business law, a field that interested him. A strange story for someone who had never heard of the prestigious institution with its international reputation! Leaving his native Kansas, he was in for a shock! For the first time, he rubbed shoulders with foreign students among the world's elite, and he set foot on the East Coast, which was far from resembling his rural state in the heartland of America. Keith James did Keith James by adapting like a chameleon, working twice as hard, and making his dear mother proud. Seven years of intense study later, he landed his first job as a lawyer in a Philadelphia firm. He had found his calling, was passionate about his profession, and aspired to become the go-to counsel for a major corporation. After five years of practice, he was offered the challenge of expanding the Florida office, in West Palm Beach. Another important decision because at that time the city was associated with crime and brain drain.

Despite everything, he takes the gamble of settling there. A turning point that will not only change his life but, more broadly, forever impact the history of West Palm Beach. Now a family man and a respected business lawyer earning a good living, Keith James gets involved in his community, always finding time to volunteer. Unknowingly, he attracts the attention of local figures who see a lot of potential in him. Mayor Lois Frankel, now serving in Congress in Washington, calls him one day to convince him to run for city council. The lawyer is as surprised as he is hesitant; he had never considered this scenario when he came to live in the county. Saying yes means starting all over again. Addressing immense issues. What to do? he wonders. He lets himself be convinced because he loves his adopted city. It's December 2010, Keith James looks at his children and makes a promise to himself: he will try to offer them a place to dream, to plan their future. What if West Palm Beach broke this violent spiral and took a different path? "A Community of Opportunity for All"—this ideal is taking root in his mind.

The man takes on this mission head-on on behalf of his own people, on behalf of everyone, and will work with all his might. For nine years, he learned the profession of politics on the ground, confronting people while sometimes brutally taking their stories head-on. " *Nothing is more difficult than going to see parents grieving the loss of their child against a backdrop of drug trafficking. It's a tragedy for everyone,* " he shares, pausing for a moment. His humanity, his convictions, his determination, his firmness, and his energy command the respect of the residents who hand him the keys to the city for his first term in 2019.

When asked what his first major decision was, Keith James answers us immediately: " *I reorganized the police force and worked together to bring people closer together. Establishing security has become my top priority,* " he retorts. New method, new vision, the mayor is in the process of overhauling everything. West Palm Beach will not only be a peaceful place, but also a place to be for business, studies, golf, tourism, partying... And even a place that will attract the wealthy neighbors of Palm Beach for dinner, a show, or an investment project. But who is this intrepid man in search of the impossible, the small world of Florida is beginning to call itself?

A certain Stephen Ross, a captain of industry and a star entrepreneur with a dazzling success, opens his eyes and ears. Soon, his wallet. At the head of the Related Ross real estate empire, owner of the Miami Dolphins, the Miami Formula 1 Grand Prix, and the founder of the Miami Tennis Tournament, Stephen Ross is the embodiment of American omnipotence. The meeting of the two men will irrevocably change the

destiny of West Palm Beach. The mayor and the multi-billionaire businessman speak the same language: both want to see their community grow, both have never been satisfied with the status quo, nor have they made excuses. Just do the job with their heart and their head.

Miami is the showcase of the Sunny State, yet the metropolis is saturated with construction, congested roads, effectively limiting its population growth. The Florida of tomorrow, combining quality of life and economic dynamism, is now located in West Palm Beach, says Stephen Ross, seduced by the alchemy of a public-private partnership. More than an alliance, it's a guaranteed lever for success. The businessman loves his native Florida and, like a Founding Father, he senses that the future of the United States is being played out here. Silicon Valley and post-Covid New York no longer inspire dreams like they once did, with their numerous restrictive legislative standards. Americans only excel when they are offered a flexible regulatory framework to unleash their creative and entrepreneurial energies. The planets are aligning in West Palm Beach, which is becoming an incubator for ideas to build a model city for the country.



Ken Himmel, Mayor Keith James and Stephen Ross ©

Under the leadership of the Keith James/Stephen Ross duo, the entire ecosystem is mobilizing. At breakneck speed, high-end office space is growing from zero to 3.3 million square meters, attracting financial and technology companies that are establishing themselves in the booming community. Major investments are being allocated to infrastructure construction and transportation. The ultra-modern Brightline regional train now has its own station, becoming an essential cog in the city's economic vitality. A comprehensive healthcare hub is also helping to transform the city. "It was one of our first battles to convince the medical giant Cleveland Clinic to set up in West Palm Beach. It was no longer possible to see residents fleeing by plane in search of a hospital, a treatment," recalls Stephen Ross, who has leaned over the bedsides of residents at all levels.

Education is also a priority. Ava Parker, president of Palm Beach State College, attends every meeting to support the mayor and his sidekick's vision. The institution works hand in hand with businesses to prepare its students and meet the needs of employers. This represents a paradigm shift, as the school no longer wants its talented students to leave after training them. Palm Beach State College is also responsible for bringing to life the mayor's cherished doctrine of a community of opportunity for all. As for low-income households, philanthropist Stephen Ross has ensured they aren't left behind with a scholarship that fully funds the education of the poorest.

The city is transforming without encountering any resistance from locals. Everyone is reaping the rewards of this ambition. Even more telling, Keith James has been voted in for a second term in 2023, where he faces no opposition. Since American politics isn't exactly known for its slickness, he manages to garner unanimous support well beyond his own camp. Now installed as "Strong Mayor," the man administers the city like a CEO by popular demand.

In just a few years, Keith James has not only miraculously reset West Palm Beach's existence, but has also transformed it into a model city of exponential growth. The county is recording exceptional figures compared to the national average, such as a greater capacity to generate new jobs (7.7% vs. 4.3%). The West Palm Beach "miracle" is accompanied by another phenomenon: the mass exodus of business leaders, researchers, and investors from New York, California, and Texans, all in search of this promised land.

Having definitely entered a new dimension, West Palm Beach has re-enchanted the American dream by becoming “The Place to be”.

Leaving West Palm Beach, one realizes that the center of attraction in the United States has indeed moved here. For good.

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