



[Home](#)

**Cover Stories**

[William Jones Bridges The Public-Private Divide](#)

[African-American Entrepreneurs Make The Right Banking Match](#)

**Features**

[Columns](#)

[Contents](#)

[Back Issues](#)

[Archives](#)

[Distribution](#)

[Daily Business Report](#)

[Online Calendars](#)

[The Reel Story](#)

[Lender Performance](#)

[Print This Page](#)

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**William Jones Bridges The Public-Private Divide**

*He gave up politics, earned an MBA from Harvard, served on a Federal Reserve Bank board and helped revitalize City Heights*

By Lynne Carrier

**Sidebars And Related News**

Nineteen years ago, then City Councilman William Jones paid a visit to Sol Price, the founder of FedMart and the Price Club, to break some news. Jones — one of the leading African-American political figures in San Diego, with a seemingly bright future in elective office — was about to announce that he would not seek re-election. He wondered what Price would think. "He stood up, came around the desk," recalls Jones, "and he said, 'You finally got smart.'"

Jones went on to earn an [MBA from Harvard Business School](#) and pursue his destiny in the private sector. As it turned out, his departure from City Hall hardly ended his public service. He went on to receive accolades for a variety of community achievements.

That comes as no surprise to people who have known the San Diego native since his days as a public service prodigy. By the age of 17, he had a job at City Hall as an aide to then-City Councilman Leon L. Williams. Now 50, Jones is still the high achiever. "He is so calm and soft-spoken that some people don't notice that he is very energetic," says Third District City Councilwoman Toni Atkins. "He's smart and pragmatic."



*Harvard-educated William Jones has been as comfortable with the powerful as he is with low- and middle-income San Diegans. His company built and still operates City Heights Retail Village, a thriving complex that brought Albertsons, Starbucks and other shops and restaurants into the neighborhood. (photo/alandackurphoto.com)*

As a developer, [Jones reconnected with Price](#) and proposed a project that would help transform a crime-ridden, down-at-the-heels section of [City Heights](#) in East San Diego. In partnership with the city's redevelopment agency, Jones' [CityLink Investment Corp.](#) fostered the creation of an eight-block, \$65 million complex. His company built — and still operates — [City Heights Retail Village](#), a thriving complex that brought an Albertsons, Starbucks and other shops and restaurants into the neighborhood. Surrounding the retail center are the elements of what Jones calls "holistic" redevelopment: a new police station, library, gym, recreation center, park, offices and 116 townhome apartments developed by Price. "I don't think it would have happened without William," says state Sen. Chris Kehoe, who was on the San Diego City Council when Jones approached her with the ambitious plan. Besides recruiting government agencies, schools and nonprofits to help make the project a reality, Jones also involved City Heights residents, inspiring them to help shape and execute the visionary master plan. "He gave the community hope," Atkins says.

As a philanthropist, Jones also wanted to bring hope to children at risk in the education system. In 1987, he founded the I Believe Project, aimed at motivating children in an urban neighborhood with an alarming high school dropout rate. Jones' organization pledged to help pay the costs of college or vocational school funding for 58 students from Kennedy Elementary School. To get the children through high school, Jones says he and other project participants had to be constant role models, sometimes plucking kids off the streets when they were out too late. "We put our arms around them, nurtured them with tutoring and life counseling and training for the SAT exam and exposure to theater and baseball and Magic Mountain," Jones says. The years of attention paid off. To date, Jones says that 60 percent of the student participants went on to higher education, including some who attended Stanford, UCLA or UC Berkeley. The program raised about \$500,000 in cash and in-kind contributions to cover its administrative and college expenses.

Meanwhile, Jones has been as comfortable with the powerful as he is with low- and middle-income San Diegans. He is serving on the boards of two publicly traded companies, [Southwest Water Co.](#) and [Semptra Energy](#). During his tenure on the Semptra board, the company has struggled to resolve lawsuits accusing it of rigging natural gas supplies and engaging in questionable business practices dating back to the energy crisis. But Jones staunchly defends the utility. "Semptra is a treasure for San Diego," he says, noting that it has given this city a major national and international corporate presence.

In the past, Jones also has served on the board of the University of San Diego, where he earned an undergraduate degree in economics.

**[Jones' Alan Greenspan Connection](#)**

A year ago, he completed his second three-year term on the board of the Los Angeles branch of the [Federal Reserve Bank](#) of San Francisco. He was chairman of that board for five years. Appointed by just-retired Federal Reserve Chairman [Alan Greenspan](#), Jones was one of four outside directors. Pay was nominal. Jones says that in 1999, his first year, he received \$4,500 for attending the monthly meetings. But the position was rich with prestige. Among its duties, the board met behind closed doors to cast advisory votes on whether the Federal Reserve should raise or lower interest rates. Jones says he also researched and presented monthly reports on the region's economy. Bank officials gather information to help them promote stability in the nation's money supply. "What I saw during my time at the Federal Reserve is this continuous effort to objectively understand what is happening at the ground level, industry by industry, in the various regions," says Jones.

Jones confesses that as a child he never imagined that his career path would one day lead to the banking industry. He credits his parents with instilling values that helped him identify and then accomplish his professional goals. His mother, Lillian, would sit on the front porch with him when he was 4 and read *Ebony* magazine with him in the afternoons. "I remember she would point out to me important men and women, and she would read to me their background. ... I remember her telling me, 'You could be like one of them if you dream and if you work hard to prepare yourself.' I remember her telling me, 'Follow your passion. Do what you want to do, but whatever you do, make sure it's your best.'"

His father, Robert, who worked as a semi truck driver, a tire distributor and later as a Navy civilian employee, moved his family from Logan Heights to Skyline Hills. Jones and his older sister were expected to pull their weight around the household. "I washed dishes, and I cleaned floors. I had to iron," says Jones. "My mother taught me how to sew because she wanted me to know how to take care of myself. When I finished the dishes, my dad would have me come outside and cut the yard and wash the cars." At the same time, his parents introduced their children to public service. Both were active in community organizations, he says.

Jones was influenced as a child by the civil rights movement. He discovered the meaning of Southern-style segregation during a family trip to Texas. "I remember drinking at a water fountain at the back of a service station in Texas, and I looked up and said, 'Oh, Mom, Dad, look here. There's white water.'" At the time, he thought it was

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nothing more than a mysterious liquid, and he did not understand until later why his parents pulled him away. The ripples from the turbulent '60s reached the West Coast. He still remembers how he and his school classmates fell on the floor sobbing when John F. Kennedy was assassinated and how he was similarly affected five years later, when Martin Luther King was killed.

As a Morse High School student, Jones excelled. He was on the track team until his senior year and played varsity football. He was named the school's outstanding scholar-athlete. In his senior year, he was elected president of the southern region of the California Association of Student Councils. The position came with an office and secretary on campus. During the same year, Councilman Williams hired Jones as an aide. "He was very curious when he started working in our office," says Williams. "He asked questions about everything."

When Williams was elected to the Board of Supervisors in 1982, Jones was appointed to complete the last year of Williams' council term and, at 28, he was elected to a full four-year term. Nevertheless, he says that during his years on the council, he never wavered in his desire to go back to graduate school.

After earning his master's degree, Jones returned to California, working in San Francisco as an investment manager and assistant to the chairman of Prudential Realty Group. He was later named general manager of a \$400 million Prudential portfolio.

He moved back to San Diego 13 years ago with the dream of developing in the city's older, deteriorating neighborhoods. He considered Sherman Heights, Encanto and Emerald Hills, among others, but decided the most urgent need was to attack blight that threatened a corridor of neighborhoods from Mission Hills and Hillcrest to Rolando near San Diego State University. "There could have been a devastating run of deterioration," he says. "There was a danger of cancer spreading across an entire mesa top and creating a huge void in our city." When the city began to consider installing a police station in City Heights, Jones saw an opportunity.

While Price worked with Jones on the City Heights Urban Village plan and invested in CityLink Investment Corp. when it was first created a year later, the two separated and now are competitors. Jones says that both felt uncomfortable that Price's nonprofit entity was bringing federal dollars into CityLink, a for-profit firm. "He did not want to get criticized," says Jones. "We were trying to be good."

Currently, Jones' company is developing the Morena Vista project on the trolley station site at Linda Vista Road and Napa Street in Mission Valley. The project includes 163 upscale apartments. Already completed are 22 lofts and 18,500 square feet of retail space.

Jones, who is married and has three children, has no regrets about his sea change from politics to real estate development. Asked if, one day, he might consider running for mayor of San Diego, he voiced reluctance, saying he's a strong supporter of the current mayor, Jerry Sanders. But Williams, Jones' long-time mentor, says that Jones' penchant for focusing on several issues at a time, his broad business and political expertise, would make him an excellent leader for the entire city. Williams predicts that if Jones becomes mayor sometime in the future, he would usher in an era of "inclusiveness and fairness."

#### Comments

Nice puff piece. But no one has told what happened during Jones' watch when he pushed the Mercado in Barrio Logan and got the City to put up funding to buy the land, at which the landholder made a huge profit. And why do former politician continually look to make profit/monies from their former constituents via the taxpayer trough of money? So where is the Mercado today? Never built, and cost the City of San Diego 100's of thousands of dollars to settle a case because of non-development. Also what about his previous involvement in the controversial SEDC?

Posted by **Daniel Beeman** at 9:05pm on 2008 July 17

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