

Senate Resolution 76

By: Senators James of the 35th, Henson of the 41st, Ramsey, Sr. of the 43rd, Rhett of the 33rd, Tate of the 38th and others

A RESOLUTION

- 1 Honoring the life and memory of Herman Jerome "HJ" Russell, Sr.; and for other purposes.
- 2 WHEREAS, the State of Georgia mourns the loss of one of its most distinguished citizens
3 with the passing of Herman Jerome "HJ" Russell, Sr., on November 15, 2014; and
- 4 WHEREAS, HJ was born on December 23, 1930, in the Summerhill Community of Atlanta,
5 Georgia, the youngest son of Maggie Goodson Russell and Rogers Russell, Sr.; and
- 6 WHEREAS his spirit of entrepreneurship emerged early; he had a paper route and opened
7 a shoeshine parlor while he was still in elementary school; and
- 8 WHEREAS, he attended David T. Howard High School, and during summers worked with
9 his father as a subcontractor, learning to be a master tradesman and mechanic; he followed
10 his father's advice to save a portion of every dollar earned, and by the age of 16, saved
11 enough money to purchase a vacant lot from the city of Atlanta, where he built his first rental
12 property, a duplex; and
- 13 WHEREAS, HJ worked as a plasterer while earning a degree in building construction from
14 Tuskegee Institute in Alabama (later Tuskegee University); and
- 15 WHEREAS, while still a senior at Tuskegee, HJ established the business that would be
16 known as H.J. Russell & Company and after graduation, he returned to Atlanta and began
17 his career, providing real estate services that included plastering, property management, and
18 construction; and
- 19 WHEREAS, HJ worked publicly and behind the scene to improve the business environment
20 for African Americans, opening doors and removing obstacles wherever possible; and

21 WHEREAS, during the Civil Rights Movement, he joined other African American business
22 leaders in providing advice and counsel as well as financial and political support to the
23 movement; and

24 WHEREAS, he was part of the group that financed the Atlanta Inquirer, a newspaper devoted
25 to unadulterated news from the frontlines of the Civil Rights Movement; and

26 WHEREAS, HJ's civic involvement brought him into lasting relationships with many of
27 Atlanta's prominent politicians, business leaders and Civil Rights activists, including Atlanta
28 Mayor Ivan Allen; Georgia Senator Leroy Johnson; political activist QV Williamson;
29 renowned Atlanta businessman Jesse Hill, Jr.; and most notably Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,
30 and his family; and

31 WHEREAS, during the 1970s, he became the largest single owner and manager of HUD
32 apartments in Georgia, developed, owned and constructed over \$150 million of real estate,
33 acquired interests in Citizens Trust Bank, an ABC affiliate television station, a beverage
34 distribution company, airport concessions, insurance, and other ventures; and

35 WHEREAS, in 1974, he co-chaired the finance committee to elect Maynard Jackson as
36 Atlanta's first black mayor; and

37 WHEREAS, HJ was the first black member of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce and in
38 1980 was elected president of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, the second African
39 American to hold that position; and

40 WHEREAS, he was the first African American to have ownership in a major sports franchise
41 with his acquisition of ten percent of the Atlanta Hawks professional basketball team and the
42 Atlanta Flames hockey team; and

43 WHEREAS, his company was involved in the building of much of the Atlanta skyline and
44 built such landmarks as Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, the Georgia Dome,
45 Philips Arena, and Turner Field; and

46 WHEREAS, he retired from H.J. Russell & Company in 2003, but continued to devote his
47 energies to his legacy projects in the Castleberry Hill area, which included Paschal's
48 Restaurant; and

49 WHEREAS, he released his autobiography, *Building Atlanta: How I Broke Through*
50 *Segregation to Launch a Business Empire*, in April of 2015; and

51 WHEREAS, HJ cemented his legacy through civic leadership, serving on numerous boards,
52 including Central Atlanta Progress, the Butler Street YMCA, Citizens Trust Bank, the
53 Atlanta Chapter of the NAACP, Allen Temple AME Church, and the Business Council of
54 Georgia; and

55 WHEREAS, an active philanthropist, he supported a wide range of worthy causes, including
56 education in the form of multi-million-dollar pledges to Clark Atlanta University, Morehouse
57 College, Georgia State University, and his alma mater, Tuskegee University, and he provided
58 a million-dollar contribution to Grady Hospital at a time when the hospital was threatened
59 by financial distress; and

60 WHEREAS, HJ helped to create the Atlanta Action Forum, which provided 6,500 summer
61 jobs for at-risk youth, and when the need arose for \$30 million dollars to keep the Martin
62 Luther King, Jr., papers in Atlanta, HJ was one of the business leaders who signed the note
63 and recruited others to do the same; and

64 WHEREAS, in 1991, he received the prestigious Horatio Alger Award, recognizing
65 dedicated community leaders who demonstrate individual initiative and a commitment to
66 excellence; and

67 WHEREAS, HJ was a loving father and grandfather to daughter, Donata Russell Major; sons,
68 H. Jerome Russell and Michael Russell; stepsons, Eric and Kevin Anderson; and
69 grandchildren, Herman "Russ" Russell, III, Zane Major, Jr., Sydney Russell, Emanuel
70 "Manny" Major, Mori Russell, Michael Russell, Jr., Benjamin Russell, and Kelsey Russell;
71 and

72 WHEREAS, he was a person of magnanimous strengths with an unimpeachable reputation
73 for integrity, intelligence, fairness, and kindness and, by the example he made of his life, he
74 made this world a better place in which to live.

75 NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE that the members of this body
76 join in honoring the life and memory of Herman Jerome "HJ" Russell, Sr., and express their
77 deepest and most sincere regret at his passing.

78 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Secretary of the Senate is authorized and directed
79 to make appropriate copies of this resolution available for distribution to the family of
80 Herman Jerome "HJ" Russell, Sr.