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Ex-Fresno council member wins Peters award

Joe Williams to be honored Feb. 18 at Valley Business Conference.

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By Tim Sheehan / The Fresno Bee

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Joe Williams, a longtime business leader and Fresno's first elected black City Council member, is the 2010 recipient of the Leon S. Peters Award.

The award, presented annually by the Greater Fresno Area Chamber of Commerce, honors lifetime success in business, leadership and community service.

Williams, 71, is president of Richard Heath & Associates, a Fresno firm that manages contracts for services to low-income families statewide.

The award will be officially presented Feb. 18 at the Valley Business Conference, but chamber officials and friends surprised Williams with the announcement Tuesday at an informal lunch gathering.

"I'm deeply humbled and shocked," Williams said.

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MARK CROSSE / THE FRESNO BEE

Longtime businessman and Fresno's first elected black City Council member Joe Williams is the 2010 Leon S. Peters Award recipient.

Prior to joining Heath in 1993, Williams served for 23 years as executive director of the Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission.

In 1977, Williams defied conventional wisdom when he won a seat on the Fresno City Council representing the Hoover High School area, serving two four-year terms.

"They said an African-American couldn't be elected to the City Council, and my position is that wasn't true," he said.

Williams has also served on the boards of Community Medical Centers, the Fresno State Foundation and Premier Valley Bank.

A Mississippi native, Williams has lived in Fresno since he was 9.

ONE
of these women is shopping for a car.



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He attended Edison High School and Fresno City College and graduated from then-Fresno State College -- now California State University, Fresno -- in 1967 with a bachelor's degree in social welfare.

"I've always wanted to make sure I clearly understood what was going on in the community and what the needs are," he said. "I learned every day."

Peters, the Fresno entrepreneur for whom the award was named, was known for his business success and compassion for the community before his death in 1983. The award was first presented in 1984.

THE REPORTER CAN BE REACHED AT TSHEEHAN@FRESNOBEE.COM OR (559) 441-6319.

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