

The Jamaica Debates Commission has moved into its most active period of preparation for the staging of national political debates, recently writing to the two main political parties to ascertain their disposition towards participating in national debates prior to both General and Local Government elections.

In a news release Friday, the commission said that at meetings in recent months it has held consultations with representatives of the ruling Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and the Opposition People's National Party (PNP) and it has now asked the parties to advise it within a few days of their disposition towards participating in national political debates and local government debates.

The Commission which has been responsible for staging the 2002 and 2007 National Political Debates is a partnership between the Jamaica Chamber of Commerce and the Media Association Jamaica Limited. The criteria for participation in the debates are that the political organisations should:

- o Have published documents which outlined its beliefs, vision and positions on a wide range of national issues
- o Have conducted valid internal democratic elections of officers
- o Have established national organizational structures with registered offices
- o Have registered a showing of at least 10% in two nationally recognized opinion polls
- o Be actively campaigning with a recognized election team.

The Commission says that securing financial support to underwrite the staging of the debates is also now a critical part of its preparation. It noted that for the last set of debates, support was received from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Desnoes & Geddes Foundation, Jamaica Public Service Company Ltd. and Petrojam Limited. It says it will have to seek support from these and other sources to ensure that the country can have access to the plans of the major players seeking the support of Jamaicans to elect them to form the next government.

The JDC, notes that it has not before staged debates relating to local government, but it believes that there may be sufficient interest among voters in this aspect of the country's governance process that warrants them being explored in national debates. The Commission

says it is also prepared to consider proposals for the possible inclusion of debates on a growth agenda and for a youth agenda for the country.

The Jamaica Debates Commission says it will shortly invite members of the business community and civil society to receive a presentation of its broad plans for the debates and for them to give feedback on these plans.

The Commission comprises Gary Allen (Chairman), Noel DaCosta (Vice Chairman), Philmore Ogle, Anthony Chang, Brian Schmidt and Jennifer Grant. Resources supporting the Commission include Dr. Eleanor Henry, Paula Graham-Haynes and Trevor Fearon.