

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF TACOMA-PIERCE COUNTY
OBSERVER REPORT

Tacoma City Council Committee of the Whole on Police Reform

Video meeting

June 23, 2020

Called to order at 3:15pm

Present: Victoria Woodards, Chris Beale, Keith Blocker, John Hines, Lillian Hunter, Conor McCarthy, Robert Thoms, Catherine Ushka, Kristina Walker

Absent: none

Victoria Woodards, Mayor We extend our condolences to the family of Manny Ellis. In this moment, life as usual has been changed. We will never be the same after COVID and nor after the widespread awakening to structural racism. In the City of Tacoma, citizens of color are three times less likely to feel safe. I have hope because of the number of people demanding change. I believe Tacoma is ready to show the nation how reform can be done. The City Manager reminded me we are not trying to reform, but to transform. We want to make something new, not tweak changes. There is a sense of urgency. Today is an initial conversation, and all voices are needed for transformation. The City Manager has engaged an expert to assist us.

Elizabeth Pauli, City Manager: We are learning what to do to transform policy, what are best practices. We are using consultants 21st Century Policy Solutions, specifically Charles Ramsey. (He was hired by Obama taskforce on police reform.) We also need to listen to community stakeholders.

Anita Gallagher, Mayor's Assistant on state and federal legislations: I have provided the Council with a document with summary of Democratic caucus proposed legislation, Trump executive order on June 16, and the GOP caucus reform on June 17. The document includes a table indicating differences in the legislations. The Senate will vote tomorrow, the GOP would need 6 Dem votes to move forward with their legislations. The Dem proposal is expected to pass the House along party lines on Thursday. Dems say GOP is nonstarter and

GOP will not support Dem proposal because of their stance on qualified immunity. At the state level we do not know if there will be a special session called in August. If so, it may take up low hanging fruit. The House and half of the Senate are up for election, so they will want to adjourn quickly because they cannot take donations while in session.

Victoria Woodards: Jacques Colon will facilitate the conversation. The goal is to have a statement that we vote on and pass about our vision and process for reform for next week's council meeting.

Jacques Colon: What is your vision for reform?

Victoria Woodards: My vision of reform is that while the initial focus is on the police department, I want to transform all services. I want to redefine what "safe "means; it does not mean just number of police on the streets. By the time we do the next citizen survey, we will change the response so that everyone will have a greater perception of safety.

Lillian Hunter: We have restored staffing of police, but have not restored services. We need to shift the role of police response from warrior mode to guardian mode. Many in the community do not feel safe because of the police and others complain the police do not show up. We need to move to community policing, to be proactive, rather than reactive. Police need to work with the community rather than be at odds with the community.

Conor McCarthy: My vision is that everyone in Tacoma feels safe and trusts the police department, and we eliminate police brutality and racist policing. We need to get body cameras quickly. What is our use of lethal force policy? We need fact finding quickly to make improvements.

Keith Blocker: We are told the police are understaffed and officers are working too much overtime. In the 90s there were gang issues and we hired officers. Now we have issues with homelessness and we have hired officers to deal with them, including a team called HOT (Homeless Outreach Team). Adding more officers will not reduce crime due to domestic violence and property crimes because officers show up after the damage has been done. Officers are not preventing crime. We need to address domestic violence and homelessness in other ways. These are acts of desperation due to poverty. They will not be stopped if there are more officers. These are the same communities that do not feel safe around

police. We need a public safety approach, where police take on a role of guardians, rather than a threat to people's safety. We know that higher poverty leads to acts of desperation (crime). Does the HOT need to be armed? Do people dealing with the mentally ill need to be armed? Or do we need people who can de-escalate the situation? The State of Washington ranks 48th or 49th in terms of beds for the mentally ill. Officers know the mentally ill by name, it should not be their role. It is not just officers that are harming communities of color, it is lack of funding and staffing of services for those who need them. Bad apples are created by bad systems.

Catherine Ushka: My vision is that we need to learn and adapt. I need to acknowledge systemic racism, we may not be at fault for it, but we are responsible for changing it. We need upstream solutions, rather than addressing symptoms, we must focus on causes. We need to have the right human resources for people's needs.

Kristina Walker: My vision is a commitment to racial justice. We need to define what we mean by community safety so we know what we mean, e.g. bringing the right person for the right job. We should have policies in place when things go wrong, but no need for them (because things should not go wrong).

Chris Beale: I agree this is a dialogue for a transformative process. We need to have a community dialogue about what is racism. I want to see a reduction in the number of people of color who perceive safety issues in Tacoma. When I heard Defund Police, I could not accept this, but when I listened to what it means about getting services, it began to make sense.

Robert Thoms: We need to restore trust. To do that we need to make several transformations. My thought about safety is presence, it is about having people present in the community, transformation of police, and making them less lethal.

John Hines: What is the role of public oversight of police, needing to build trust in police, who responds when someone calls 911? Do we need someone with a badge and gun to respond to mental illness or homeless? We need someone with training and de-escalation skills. As a teacher I have seen how much we have asked teachers to do, and they focus less on teaching. So I feel for police who are being asked to do so much. I would like safety to be discussed more broadly than police.

Jacques Colon: What is the process by which you want to achieve your vision? Before we start, I want to give the Mayor the floor.

Woodards: I want to remind the public that the Council did not have time to prepare and we are being transparent. This is a messy process, so do not be critical of us. I am encouraged by hearing from the Council that their vision is that everyone who lives here feels respected and safe.

Beale: There is a lack of follow through in Project Peace and we need to staff Project Peace adequately. We need unarmed cops or social workers to address needs. We need to look at different police staffing. We need community engagement. Our police sub-stations are underutilized, they could be hubs for resources, like housing, counseling, and jobs.

Blocker: We tend to work in silos. It isn't just the City; housing, public schools, health care, etc., also affect racism and anti-Blackness. The City can take the lead, but need to collaborate with other government and the private sector. We all want to end homeless, we all want affordable housing etc. We all need to come to the table to discuss each of our roles in structural racism and anti-Blackness. We need to follow through. Ultimately, we are talking about how do we build community. Unless we work together, we will be talking about this 10, 20, 30 years from now.

McCarthy: We received a staffing study that violent crime went up 15% in the last 5 years. I agree that we need to support other programs that will reduce crime, but we remain the property crime capital of Washington. We need to address the racism, but we need police. We need to be bold in disciplining police who violate public trust. The Council and police cannot do this by ourselves, but we need to engage other organizations. We know we have exemplary officers.

Ushka: I wrote down some adjectives: unfiltered, community led, quick, multilingual, transparent, a process where people are heard and feel heard.

Hunter: Build on work that has already started. What I think I know about Project Peace and what is going on may be different. Build our capacity. Police being proactive and part of a community. It mystifies me that the substations sit empty and are underused. We need to

look at the job description for police. Maybe we should bring in subject area experts rather than expecting all police to do everything. Public education is key, without it, people have few options. We need to address the 15,000 people in Pierce County without a High School education.

Thoms: Underscore transparency and community led. We need to work with other organizations. We probably never had the resources for mental health. Police officers are the backstop. People with weapons should not be doing social services. We need to get police involved in the conversation about biases. We need to use data, we need to involve community partners.

Walker: Start with a resolution. Involve the public. Need to identify what is policy and funding .We need think about other languages, about people not online, and that people of color do not feel safe.

Woodards: I want to see us re-invigorate Project Peace and talk to the City Manager about where it should "live" so it can be successful. I believe we need re-engage the community, but we need to make sure we have done what we said we would do, e.g. police bias training, etc. I think we need a a focus group with people who have had negative experiences with the police to hear from them. I think part of this process needs to be healing and reparations. I don't mean 40 acres and a mule, I mean we need to take responsibility for the system we have. We may not have caused it or committed a racist act, but we need to apologize and heal. For a very long time I wanted to launch "Compassionate Tacoma." I never thought how needed this would be right now. We have a lot of work ahead and it is going to be messy.

Meeting adjourned at 5:05pm