

APPROVED 9/1/2020

**MINUTES
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
VIRTUAL LISTENING SESSION ON POLICING AND
RACIAL JUSTICE IN ORANGE COUNTY
July 7, 2020
7:00 p.m.**

The Orange County Board of Commissioners met for a Virtual Listening Session on Policing and Racial Justice on Tuesday, July 7, 2020 at 7:00 p.m.

COUNTY COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Chair Rich, and Commissioner Bedford, Commissioner Dorosin, Commissioner Greene, Commissioner McKee, and Commissioner Marcoplos

COUNTY COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: Commissioner Price

COUNTY ATTORNEYS PRESENT: John Roberts

COUNTY STAFF PRESENT: County Manager Bonnie Hammersley, Deputy County Manager Travis Myren, Sheriff Charles Blackwood, Criminal Justice Resources Director Caitlin Fenhagen, Deputy Clerk to the Board David Hunt and Assistant Deputy Clerk II Allen Coleman (All other staff members will be identified appropriately below.)

Chair Rich called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

Due to current public health concerns, the Board of Commissioners conducted a Virtual Listening Session on Tuesday, July 7, 2020. Members of the Board of Commissioners participated in the meeting remotely. Members of the public were able to view and listen to the meeting via live streaming video at <http://www.orangecountync.gov/967/Meeting-Videos> and on Orange County Gov-TV on channels 1301 or 97.6 (Spectrum Cable).

1. Welcome – Chair Penny Rich

Chair Rich said tonight's session is not an open dialogue, but the listening session is being recorded to help the County Commissioners, Sheriff's Office, Human Rights and Relations Commission synthesize the information and plan for future actions.

Chair Rich introduced the Commissioners, noting that Commissioner Price is absent due to a death in the family. She introduced Sheriff Blackwood; Caitlin Fenhagen, Criminal Justice Resources Department (CJRD) Director; and Frances Castillo, Human Rights and Relations Commission Chair.

2. Presentation by Human Relations Commission (HRC) Chair, Frances Castillo

Frances Castillo provided an overview of the Commission's mission.

3. Listening Session – Public Comment

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Deborah Stroman said the community is too comfortable, and seeks "normalcy". She read an excerpt from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from a Birmingham Jail. She said normalcy does not lead to change, and allows for inequities and racism to continue. She said

the only normal that is acceptable, is one where all are equal and brotherhood, peace and justice exist. She said she looks forward to further discussions and actions for change.

Tomeka Ward–Satterfield said she appreciates this listening session, but says it feels like an empty gesture by the elected officials. She said she would prefer a study of systemic racism be conducted within the County, and the elected officials tell the community on how they plan to address the problems.

Heather Redding thanked the BOCC for the opportunity to speak. She said issues of racism and white supremacy are baked into American culture, and she is greatly concerned. She said children must be safe in school, but she questions the validity of School Resource Officers (SROs). She asked if the BOCC would examine data regarding the success, or lack thereof, of SROs, and to work with the school boards to make necessary changes. She said the police cannot handle all issues, and funds should be better distributed. She asked the Sheriff's department to give \$25,000 of its drug forfeiture funds to a local non-profit, as permitted by law.

Jame Paulen thanked the Board for holding this session. She said she is concerned about police presence in schools, and asked if SROs are a good use of funds. She said funds could be better used in this time of Covid. She echoed the former speaker's comments about the Sheriff's forfeiture funds, and specifically suggested "Fathers on the Move" to receive these funds.

Amelia Covington said police in schools sets a standard for the school to prison pipeline. She said CHCCS is not free from issues of racism, and has the second largest achievement gap in the country. She asked the BOCC to work with the school boards on alternative models of school safety, and echoed the request for the reallocation of Drug Forfeiture funds of \$25,000.

Kimberly Brewer said she is the Chair of Orange County Bail Bond Justice, a partnership of 12 local churches seeking to end unjust bail practices in the community. She said the partnership observes court practices, and has found the poor most adversely affected. She highlighted racial inequities within the bail hearing system as well. She said Orange County has made many reforms, but there is room for more.

Anna Richards called to attention the article from the Northern Orange and Chapel Hill National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) of a 6-point agenda for transformation in the community. She said this plan looks at many issues including hiring and retention of officers, expectations from Police, etc. She said these groups also support removing police from schools. She said upcoming conversations include the issue of "Counselors, Not Cops in Schools," and will include panelist from around the country. She said a 19-year-old woman was physically assaulted last week at a peaceful protest in Chapel Hill, and this is a sign that this community is also deeply affected by issues of racism. She said she hopes the BOCC will work toward change.

Joseph Verykoulis said he is grateful for leaders such as Sheriff Blackwood and Cait Fenhagen, who are working towards equity. He said he finds a lot of the dialogue around police to be quite detrimental. He said calls to remove SROs from Schools does not sit well with him, as SROs serve students in a support role and keep students safe. He said it would be a mistake to remove them from the schools. He said there are many larger underlying issues that contribute to racism, and societal breakdowns. He said many concerns begin in childhood, and blaming police for all these issues is shortsighted.

Horace Johnson said he is from Orange County, and was part of school integration in the 1960s. He said teachers were not trained or equipped to deal with individuals of color. He said the Sheriff is a smart man, but he wonders how law enforcement is being trained to work with people of color. He said he does not want to defund the police, but he would support reallocating some funds to those who are trained appropriately. He said his father was the mayor of Hillsborough for 12 years, and it is important to reach across the aisle to work

together. He said he would like to see more outreach from the Sheriff's Office, and hopes the BOCC can offer more racial diversity in its own members.

Soteria Shepperson said she is an organizer, business owner, and citizen in Orange County, and is concerned about policing in the schools. She said she has dear white friends, and wonders if they are speaking to their sons, as she has to speak to young black boys in her life. She said White People are also suffering as a result of racism in America. She said she wants to know where white boys are getting guns. She said it takes more time in North Carolina to be a Barber than it does to be a Police Officer. She said she has been a substitute teacher in CHCCS, and on March 11 of this year, she and several students were thrown out of the library by the Chapel Hill Carrboro City Schools PTA president, who stated the PTA meeting was more important than theirs. She said she spoke to the library president, and she wants transformation.

Rachel Thomas-Levy said she lives in Orange County and teaches in a School that is technically in Orange County. She said she supports Anna Richards's comments about the NAACP's plan for change. She said she also wants to promote Maria Parker, based out of Athens, who supports defunding police by 50% over 10 years. She said she does not see the need for SROs. She said counselors and social workers are a much better use of funds. She said she lived in Asheville for years, and a black man was killed, much to the surprise of white Asheville. She said she does not want this community to sit by, and be surprised if something happens, and would rather see study and action take place.

Lucy Lewis said she is a Chapel Hill native, and was the first director of the Orange County Human Rights and Relations Department. She echoed support for several previous comments, including realignment of funds; NAACP recommendations; removal of SROs, etc. She said there have been many issues around racism locally and nationally, and she hopes the BOCC will be proactive for change in this community.

Allison Mahaley thanked the BOCC for holding the listening session, and said she is surprised by the lack of diversity in this County. She said the Black Community has been pushed out, and the Court House currently sits in a formerly African American neighborhood. She said the Fairview neighborhood sits on top of a former landfill, and there are deep issues that point to systemic racism here in Orange County. She said she feels a lot of hope that the country is in the middle of a national transformation during this pandemic. She said she realizes the budget has already been set, but hopes to see a long term plan of shifting resources away from law enforcement, and towards agencies that support black and brown communities. She said she is especially concerned about housing, and affordable housing.

Blake Tedder said he just returned from the coast, and was shocked by the Trump and confederate flags that he saw. He said it is a different world than what he sees in Orange County. He said overt racism is definitely here in Orange County, but it looks different than the eastern coast. He said the BOCC has to step up its game regarding systemic racism, and overt racism is on the rise and is beyond concerning. He said local leaders must be a shining light. He agreed with listening to the words of the NAACP, and other speakers here tonight. He said he is extremely worried that racism will continue to get a foothold, and Orange County will be taken down.

Elvira Mebane said she was not going to speak, as she was attending a virtual meeting with the Board of Elections. She said she is concerned about SROs, and many kids do not see them as armed police person. She said the SROs present a positive role to the students. She said her own child is ready to attend to high school, and his experience with SROs was incredibly positive. She said she would like to find a way to keep the SROs presence in the schools, and suggested they may not need to have guns. She said the SRO programs have helped her child. She challenged the BOCC to find a way to allow students to continue to have positive relationships with law enforcement.

Gayane Chambless said Elvira Mebane's comments hit home. She said there are so many issues in play, and her focus is on relationship building as a means for change. She said law enforcement can interact positively with students, and have safe relationships that allow interactions to be more productive. She said the community cannot be so divisive. She said a safety presence is necessary, should an emergency occur, and teachers should not have to be armed. She said she would be open to the reallocation of funds from the police to mental health, etc. She said she would like to provide more training to law enforcement in such areas. She applauded Sheriff Blackwood's vision and efforts thus far.

Joseph Verykoulis said Elvira Mebane articulated the importance of SROs being on site at schools. He said Orange County is growing, and defunding law enforcement is a bad idea. He said police keep people safe.

Jame Paulen said the idea of reallocating funds for police officers in schools is to put those funds towards school counselors, trained professionals, etc. that help with investing in students mental health, food, etc. She said law enforcement does not always make people feel safe. She said greater resources for mental health needs and relationship building would create a stronger community. She said she is glad the BOCC chose to listen prior to making a plan.

Amelia Covington reiterated that defunding the police is asking society to reimagine of what safety could look like.

Heather Redding said the criminal justice system is broken, and current practices are not working. She said it is too late for reform, but rather a total change and transformation is needed. She said more prisons and jails are not needed. She said there are communities already doing the work, and the wheel does not need to be reinvented. She said leaders need to listen to the most vulnerable, and those who are most affected by systemic racism.

Horace Johnson said if two snakes mate, you will get a snake. He said he has the utmost confidence in Sheriff Blackwood, and his deputies. He said Police officers are protectors, but there are a few that spark some concern for him. He said he would really like to see a thorough screening process involved in hiring police officers.

Soteria Shepperson said the reopen NC movement is nonsense, and she was surprised that a cohort of white citizens could walk around with guns and the state gets reopened. She asked what it must feel like to wake up White. She said she has imagined what it must be like to walk without someone following her, or being able to take a run without fear of being shot. She said leaders must be proactive and not reactive, and an area of great concern is guns.

Tracy Bell said there must be a bridge built between law enforcement and the community. She said law enforcement needs to be focused on helping people in the community. She said she is a media specialist in Chapel Hill Carrboro City Schools, and she would love to see the schools work with law enforcement to partner on positive relationships.

Verla Insko said she did not plan to speak, and she has enjoyed listening to the conversation. She said the BOCC is collecting information about the current situation, but these conversations are a starting point for long-term change for the next generation and how they grow up. She looks forward to more social integration.

Souna, (she) Culturally Specific Trainer, said Dr. Joy Degruy talks about how past trauma affects a person currently. She said there have been hundreds of years of trauma without mental health care. She said this trauma has never been recognized or healed. She echoed support for reallocation of drug forfeiture funds to Fathers on the Move, as well as the plan outlined by the NAACP.

Elizabeth Evans said she had not intended to speak, but has been touched by the positive experiences between SROs and students. She said the core issue is relationship building, which seems to be fostered by the field of mental health and guidance. She agreed with the reallocation of funds for these types of uses.

Sophie Suberman said she is glad the BOCC is having this session, and zoom is a hard format to have such a listening session. She said relationship building is important, not only

between people, but between systems as well. She said Covid is going to bring so many changes, many of which will more adversely affect brown and black people. She said taking advantage of poor people, discrimination, etc. is built into the foundation of this country, and must be addressed if real change is to be achieved. She said having conversations like this – showing up and asking – is being a part of the change.

Elizabeth Evans stressed the importance of having bilingual people involved with building relationships: Spanish, Burmese, and Karen,

Souna, (she) Culturally Specific Trainer, suggested using repurposed funds to extend the Orange County Health Department hours to include weekends and some sort of emergency services through the health department. She asked the BOCC to seek consideration to help with the eviction crisis and housing crisis, e.g. extend payment deadlines. She suggested making police hiring procedures public, along with any officers who have received complaints or concerns. She said the public could be part of the hiring and investigative process.

Mark Xavier said he would like to speak about the Education in Orange County, and the numbers over the years are alarming for African American kids. He asked if the BOCC can help to stop these trends. He said if a problem is solvable, but continues for several years, the Board should address the issue and try to help. He said the BOCC is not the school board, but it can still be helpful in educational issues. He said he would also like the Board to help make the police system better in Orange County. He said no one is benefitting from the County until everyone is benefitting.

Jean Bolduc applauded the Board for its efforts with this session. She said it has been her experience that when elected officials get together and want to be quite, it can be very challenging. She said her son was in middle school in the early 90s, and was headed for Orange High School, which was full of troubles. She said there was a lot of violence, which would have resulted in arrests, had the actions occurred elsewhere. She said the Governors Crime Commission put out \$1 million to fund SROs to help get a handle on these situations. She joined the task force to help create a safe schools program, and wrote the grant that funded the original SRO program. She said the intention at that time was for the SROs to be focused on relationship building and preventative strategies to keep schools safe. She said this program has been well run by the Sheriff's department, and has been racially balanced in its officers, and she is confident that it can continue to be a leading program in the state. She urged the BOCC to have the community review the program, and establish any improvements that may be needed. She said not to throw the baby out with the bath water.

Sophie Suberman referred to previous comments about restorative practice and trauma, and said all have experience with trauma in one way or another. She said we do not have good systems to process feelings, and there are people from within the system who were not able to speak tonight for fear of retaliation for their comments. She asked if there are ways to support governmental systems that allow those from within to voice their feelings, without fear of retaliation. She said this is especially important in cross-cultural communication.

Horace Johnson said he worked as the Director of City Wide Programs for the New York City Housing Authority for 20 years, with children and after school programming. He said the system in Orange County is woefully inadequate in dealing with children after school. He said if students are not athletes, they have nothing to do. He said a transportation system is needed to take children to after school programming, and community centers to house them. He encouraged the Board to get out into the community, and learn more about the children and their needs.

Charlene Campbell echoed Horace Johnson's comments, and said there is a desperate need for after schools activities for Middle and High School students. She said if one is not in band or sports, there is really nothing for one to do at school.

Souna, (she) Culturally Specific Trainer, said after school programming is important, and it is also important to as why are parents having to work so long in order to live here. She said

the cost of living affects how much time people can spend with families and neighbors, and puts additional stress on families.

4. Commissioner Remarks

Mark Marcoplos said this was a really good forum, and he hopes conversations will continue. He said there are so many more people who can contribute to this, and the Board will do its best work through collaboration, and it may not always be comfortable. He said this is time to get stuff done. He said in chaos there is opportunity.

Mark Dorosin thanked all of this evening's participants, and said this is the beginning of the beginning. He said further comments can be emailed or called in to the Board. He said the County website contains links to the Resolution designating Racism as a public health issue in Orange County, Governor Coopers Executive Order, police data, etc. He said the Board did not hold a forum just to have a forum. He said the Board will process this evening's comments and determine what falls under the purview of the Board, the Sheriff, the HRC, etc. He said there will be continued transparency.

Sally Greene thanked all the residents who came out and spoke, and the comments have been very enlightening and helpful.

5. Closing Remarks – Annette Moore, Human Rights and Relations Director

Annette Moore read Commissioners Price's prepared remarks:

First, I personally want to express my appreciation to those of you who have the willingness to stand up for civil rights, the courage to show up for justice, the moral conviction to speak up for human dignity, and the audacity to rise up and say, Black Lives Matter.

As we proceed to break the chains of structural racism, we need to do some truth-telling. We must understand that the strength and wealth of America was built on stolen land by stolen people. The land on which we now sit was stolen from the Indigenous People of the so-called New World. The people who labored, with no just compensation, were stolen from their homelands in Africa.

So, the process to dehumanize people of color began centuries ago, and this dehumanization is embedded deep in the American psyche. Meanwhile, the struggle and the demand for human dignity also began centuries ago and has perpetuated unto today.

With the recent witnessing of violence and murder of Black men, women and children, we are seeing a resurgence in protests and outcries for reforms—for reforms in law enforcement, in the judicial system, in our schools and in other sectors of our society. Once again, as in generations past, Americans are endeavoring to right the wrongs of history. Indeed, we have made progress, and indeed, we still have a long way to go.

If we are to disrupt racism, if we are to change hearts and minds, and if we are to envision freedom, dignity and justice for everyone, we must join together in solidarity and do the work. The challenge is to recognize and respect the value of the lives of Black, Indigenous and People of Color in our local and global communities. I believe we can do this.

On behalf of the Board of County Commissioners, thank you to the people of Orange County who have voiced their concerns and opinions in this listening session, thank you for participating, and know that we will take action based on your input.

Renée A. Price, Commissioner/Vice-Chair

Chair Rich reminded the public that the listening session is being recorded, in order to synthesize information, and work on possible changes in policy and practices.

Adjournment

The listening session adjourned at 9:06 p.m.

VOTE: UNANIMOUS

Penny Rich, Chair

David Hunt
Deputy Clerk to the Board