

The blue wall of silence continues in Portland

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Police make up a peculiar subculture in society. Often they have their own moral code of behavior, an “us against them” attitude, and a history of standing shoulder-to-shoulder behind a “blue wall of silence.”

On Oct. 22, Mayor Charlie Hales and the City Council opted to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Portland Police Bureau behind that wall with the passage of a resolution appealing the oversight requirements of their settlement with the Department of Justice.

Readers will recall that the city and the Portland Police Bureau were sued by the DOJ over the excessive use of force by police officers upon people with mental health issues. Many people — including U.S. District Judge Michael Simon, who has been assigned the case — took note of the fact that communities of color were not included in this assessment, primarily because the Portland Police Bureau was not reporting the race of the persons they stopped. Without this data, there was insufficient evidence to prove (or disprove) racial profiling.

Fortunately, Simon noted this omission and held a Fairness Hearing to help determine whether or not the terms of the settlement were, “fair, adequate and reasonable.” For two days he heard testimonials from the people of Portland; among them, large numbers of people of color testifying about their abuse at the hands of the Portland police.

The testimonials made a difference. Not only did Simon insist on having oversight over the progress of this settlement, but he also gave enhanced amicus status to the Albina Ministerial Alliance Coalition for Justice and Police Reform. The judge ordered that leaders from Portland’s communities of color would be able to ask

questions — just questions — during the city’s annual progress report. This is precisely the part of the settlement that the City Council is challenging.

I was one of the 23 people who testified against the resolution at City Hall. Others included Dr. LeRoy Haynes and Dr. T. A. Bethel of the Albina Ministerial Alliance Coalition for Justice and Police Reform, Ashlee Albies and Mark Kramer of the National Lawyers Guild, Becky Straus of the ACLU, Charles Flewelling of Disability Rights Oregon, Debbie Aiona of League of Women Voters, Chris Lowe of Jobs with Justice, Dan Handelman of Copwatch and Jason Kafoury of Kafoury/McDougal Law Firm. Not a single person supported the City’s resolution to appeal. The City Council passed it anyway.

If this raises questions in your own mind, it should. The resolution states that the City Council “seeks clarification on the authorized frequency, scope, procedure and evidentiary burdens” of the annual hearings ordered by the court, and “in furtherance of that goal, the legal procedure for seeking clarification is through an appeal, writ of mandamus or writ of prohibition.” However, the discussion by the council and the city attorney made it clear that the city is actually challenging the court’s authority to order the hearings at all.

The City Council’s response to those of us who testified was this: we know you don’t trust us, the community doesn’t trust us, and Judge Simon doesn’t trust us — but we don’t need your trust to fix the bureau. It’s our job to oversee this settlement so we’re voting for this appeal. Never mind that we are all white. Never mind that all of our compliance officer/community liaison finalists are white as well. We trust ourselves to oversee our Police Bureau and ourselves.

This response to the community’s expressed concerns was an unfortunate

encapsulation of the problem at hand. Of course the City Council needs the community’s trust, especially now. Our DOJ settlement did not take place in a vacuum: it is linked to the DOJ investigations in Seattle and New Orleans, and it evokes images of Ferguson’s Mike Brown, NYC’s Eric Garner, Florida’s Trayvon Martin and Portland’s Aaron Campbell.

From the moment the judge issued the settlement, I was concerned about the city’s attempt to spin it as if race was never an issue. Adding insult to injury, I was told in no uncertain terms that individual members of the city’s Human Rights Commission were not allowed to voice concerns not in alignment with official policy. The council’s resolution was the final straw and the primary reason for my resignation from the Human Rights Commission, effective Oct. 23.

The mission of the Human Rights Commission is to eliminate discrimination and bigotry, to strengthen intergroup relationships and to foster greater understanding, inclusion and justice for those who live, work, study, worship, travel and play in the City of Portland. Yet the recent appeal does not just ignore the mission, it also runs contrary to expressed intent. The role of the Human Rights Commissioners is to advise the City Council on human rights matters in our community. Yet I was repeatedly told that I could not speak out as a commission member if my viewpoints “made the City Council look bad.”

I am a person of conscience and will not allow myself to be used as part of the city’s public relations campaign. What this community needs is more transparency, not a wall of silence. I will continue to place my trust and service in the Albina Ministerial Alliance Coalition for Justice and Police Reform. I encourage others to do likewise.



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High Walls

by Ron Sanford

It is A.D. 2014 and we are as a world still wanting, when we ask the most basic questions. One of them is how to stop a tyrant

Do we fight fire with fire or send them tribute?
Do we buy them off then divide and conquer?
All these have worked but only temporarily.

One thing is certain: We must do something different as most of the world now lives under tyranny
Where are the Jeffersonians?

If it is true that real change must come from within then what kind of incentives should be given to stiff-necked leaders who will never change?

If it ever comes to do or die, a bottom line, or us versus them, I am an American first, but questioning, Are we just a paper tiger? Can we do some good?

In the battle against human nature and war, try to look for the best deterrent we can.
It was the Chinese who may have said it best

High walls make good neighbors!