

MINUTES

A Public Forum conducted by Walterboro City Council was held at City Hall on Tuesday, December 1, 2009 at 6:15 P.M. with Mayor Bill Young presiding.

PRESENT WERE: Mayor Bill Young, Council Members: Dwayne Buckner, Randy Peters, Charles Lucas, Ted Parker, Franklin Smalls and Tom Lohr. City Manager Jeff Lord, City Clerk Betty Hudson, City Attorney George Cone and Attorney Ashley Amundson were also present. There were approximately 46 persons in attendance at the meeting, along with George Salisbury of the Press and Standard and Phillip Taylor of The Dispatch.

The purpose of the forum was for the community to join with city officials in a search for answers to the community's concern with violence that started on November 9 with a drive-by shooting that killed 3 people and injured six others.

There being a quorum present, Mayor Young called the meeting to order and gave a brief summary of why the forum was being held. He said, we have come together to discuss the recent tragic events that have taken place in our community. He stated that the City will give as much information as we can about the ongoing investigation and what we are doing from a prevention standpoint. He further stated, I can assure you that every Council Member, the City Manager and the Director of Public Safety share your concerns and that we are committed to doing everything necessary to bring the criminals to justice and to protect our citizens in the future. He further stated, we cannot allow the criminal element to intimidate us into silence. I would caution anyone who might want to try and make the people who committed these murders into victims. If we allow this to happen, we are saying that they are not responsible for their actions. Make no mistake about it, they are not victims and they are responsible. Many of you have waited several weeks for this forum, so that you could receive information and express your feelings to your elected officials. We are here to listen. We want to hear your concerns and your suggestions.

Public Safety Director - Chief Otis Rhodes

Chief Rhodes gave a brief statement on the status of the investigation to solve the recent crimes. He stated that on the night of the shooting incident, November 9, SLED was called in to assist the Police investigation. He pointed out that the local Police Department has worked along with SLED to solve this crime. So far, there is one person in custody, we are pretty sure is involved in the murders. I cannot give you a whole lot of details, because SLED is the lead investigator on this case.

City Manager Lord

Mr. Lord opened by stating that the public forum is supposed to be a solution based discussion. We want to hear from the community. We will also lay some ground work on things we are currently doing.

Mr. Lord stated that City has taken a broad band approach to addressing the whole community through different things which are city wide and these impact the issues of concern today.

Mr. Lord pointed out some of the things that the city is currently doing:

1. The City is working to provide more economic opportunity. We want to provide some jobs to people who can't currently find employment, and that will help the situation. We have been promoting the City to visitors and promoting a buy local campaign.

2. Promoting community pride or neighborhood pride. We have done this through increased code enforcement. We have recently agreed to take over the parks that are in the city and have engaged a firm to do a master plan, so we can hopefully make the parks a place that people want to spend time and have a place for our kids to go.

3. We have also started looking at funding for our sidewalks to help make a more walkable community.

4. The big thing is law enforcement. We have had a pretty significant initiative through our community policing program, which has been in place almost a year now.

Chief Rhodes then gave a brief explanation of the activities and results achieved through the community policing program. Chief Rhodes stated that the program is in a partnership with the ministerial alliance and several schools. Other participation by his staff includes participation in job fairs, committee meetings, trash control and working with the Community Response Alliance.

Chief Rhodes gave the following statistics with regard to hand guns. From January 1, 2009 to December 1, 2009, the Department seized 60 weapons off the street. Of those 60, there were 30 guns stolen. Of those 30, we have recovered 4 guns from this jurisdiction and have recovered 8 through other agencies.

Chief Rhodes briefly discussed the statistics on injuries involving a firearm from 2004 to 2009.

Chief Rhodes also explained that in police administration we have started watching what our officers are doing. One thing we are watching is how we talk to people. Most of the people we deal with are under the influence of some type of drug and/or alcohol or on medication. We are dealing with kids now that are raising themselves, or were raised by an older brother or sister or their grandparents. These kids think totally different than we do. What we are experiencing is not different from any other place in the world. We have made a consistent effort to involve the City Manager. If we have a problem that we know about, we try to scratch it right there. We try to sit down and get rid of the problem right then.

Mayor Young then allowed those persons who wished to speak to address Council at this time. The speakers were as follows:

Timothy Murdock

Mr. Timothy Murdock, a county resident addressed Council. He stated he was a former law enforcement officer for the City of New York, decorated and retired veteran who also worked as a criminal investigator for the United States Government. He stated that Walterboro has 34,000 residents. There is 1 shooting for every 3,400 people. Reading from a copy of the New York Daily News, Mr. Murdock pointed out that the article reads "South Carolina peddles tax free weapons for Black Friday". The State of South Carolina is putting its own sick twist on Black Friday with tax holiday on firearms purchases. For the 48 hours following Thanksgiving, gun

buyers will enjoy a break of up to 9% in state and local taxes. The article further reads that the second amendment weekend will sure help South Carolina stay among the top 5 states that provides 85% of illegal hand guns recovered in New York City.

Mr. Murdock told Mayor Young, with your support, I would like to see the Mayors of the cities of South Carolina get together with the state legislature on my proposal. My proposal is: If one of these young criminals get caught with a firearm, put them in jail for 5 years. No sentencing, this will be automatic. In New York City, you get 3 years. Put them in jail for 5 years. It's about time we stop the killing. Young children getting killed, for what.

Ms. Carolyn Murdock

Ms. Carolyn Murdock, a city resident on Lemacks Street, then addressed Council. She asked if the City had considered placing a curfew in the City of Walterboro. Chief Rhodes responded that this matter had been talked about. We started about 3 years ago looking at it. We really have had the same problems with the violence part - it's not curfew oriented stuff we need to be dealing with right now. Chief Rhodes stated he would be glad to meet with Ms. Murdock one on one for input.

Marsha Johnson

Ms. Johnson, a city resident, asked a general question, are we allocating our resources right in terms of crime prevention? Ms. Johnson also stated, I think this is a very difficult problem and I think a lot of people are trying to do a really good job and we need to just keep working at it and not point to persons and work really hard to come together. Our neighborhood had a problem with someone dealing drugs in a house and we got together and worked on it, the police responded and the person is no longer dealing drugs out of our neighborhood. So, if we all work together and stop being afraid of what might happen if we stand up, we can do something and make a difference.

City Manager Lord then commented on the question of allocation of resources. Mr. Lord stated that this is something the city is always analyzing. He pointed out that the money that we put into public safety is better than half. So, there is a lot of resources going in that direction. That's always evaluated every year.

Eric Campbell

Mr. Eric Campbell, a country resident, said I think this is a good start, with the community coming together. I think that the city, the county, law enforcement and school district need to come together as a joint effort. I know Joe Williams was working a couple years ago to bring about a YMCA. The city and county should come together to provide something for these kids at an early age. The churches and pastors are trying to do things to get these kids involved, but we need to provide something for the youth. It's time for the community to come together to provide something like a boys club, girls club, or a YMCA. We have been rejecting that for years. People like myself, I am fortunate enough to take my kids somewhere else, but as Chief said early, some parents work 24/7 and they can't take their kids to other areas to get them exposed. So, I think the city and the county now need to come together to provide some type of mentor program for our youth.

Jerome Jones

Pastor Jerome Jones, a county resident, who lives on Sidney's Road, addressed Council. He stated, I would like to declare "A day of Repentance in Walterboro". The vision is simply - come together as a group of people, the place would be at the old football station. We will have prayer time. We just want you to come. Because the innocent blood has already been shed, each one of us has the responsibility to look in the mirror, look at the reflection you see in the mirror. If you don't like what you see, I would say simply, let's change it.

Pastor Jones further stated, I am here to tell each and every one of you. The problems that we are going through right now, it's not with the children age group. It's that age group between 18 and 25. They need something to get involved with. We need to teach them another skill level. We need to help and see what we can do to go to the next level.

Dave Harris

Mr. Dave Harris, a city resident, pointed out that in New York, you don't take your firearm into a bar and if you are a police officer you don't hang out in a place that's a bar - that's an unwritten law. I got stuff stolen from me and I don't like to think that it ended up in New York, because they have had the toughest hand gun laws since 1911. He suggested that the bad boys, when you catch them, don't let them go because they don't have enough money to hire a lawyer. Put them away and make them work for their food and clothing. They might learn a trade.

David Riddle

Mr. David Riddle, a city resident, addressed Council. He gave different scenarios of shooting incidents that have occurred in Walterboro. He stated, Walterboro is a wonderful town, my whole family still lives here and it's going to continue to be a great town. But I have seen this town diminish in the last seven years. It's depressing for me because living on Hampton Street, we are a neighborhood. This is a poor representative for the city to have this many people in here tonight because of what happened. If everybody was concerned about what happened back here, this place would be overflowing. Thank you for coming. Every day, I pick up more trash on Hampton Street. This town is becoming a trash pit. Littering goes on every single day and it is progressively getting worse. There is trash everywhere in this town. Mr. Riddle also pointed out that there is a lot going on between Lemacks Street and the bypass. He stated, I am hoping that law enforcement is watching that particular area. You don't have a reaction to something until there is an action. People get killed and now all of a sudden we want to do something about it. We can't put a band aid on a big problem. We've got to fix it. I mean fix it, stop it, and fix it. Because if they go away, in a month or two months, we might be back right where we were. I know this is a very complicated, detailed problem, but there is got to be a way to solve what's going on, and the only way to do it is with "togetherness". A neighborhood crime watch could help, but I can encourage you to do one thing. Anytime you see anything that you think is foul play or out of whack, call the Police Department and report it, right then and there.

When Mr. Riddled questioned the Mayor on the amount of the reward, Mayor Young responded that the reward is up to \$1,000 from Crime Stoppers and \$5,000 from the City that is also administered through Crime Stoppers.

Mr. Riddle stated, you can't get anybody to talk for \$6,000, but if you get \$50,000 on the table you may get someone to come up with some information. I'm telling you "money talks".

Joe Williams

Mr. Williams, a city resident, told Council he had been working with a group of community leaders for about three years. I am trying to get a YMCA established. A YMCA is not going to be the answer to the problem, but it will certainly help. After a lot of consideration, our Board has decided to approach the county with the proposal that the YMCA contracts with the county to administer and to manage the Recreation Commission. Now, there are a lot of ramifications with that and a lot of terms and conditions that are to be worked out. But the YMCA can do some things that the Recreation Commission just can't quite do. For instance, the YMCA can collaborate and bring together entities in the community to work together to provide programs and facilities, not just for young people, but for the whole community. The YMCA stands for strong families, strong bodies and strong character. The YMCA can bring the churches together; work with the schools, the universities, the county, the police department, the sheriff department, community clubs and organizations, to get things done that the Recreation Commission just can't quite do the way the YMCA can. We have presented this to the ministerial association, the school board, the city council and county council and we have gotten good response. We are very close to the point of presenting a written proposal to the county to do just that. So, I encourage you to support our efforts for a YMCA.

Virginia Walker

Ms. Virginia Walker, a city resident, told Council we have been here almost 5 years. I was born, wasn't raised here, but all our family is here. It just breaks my heart to see what has happened to this beautiful city. There is a solution. My pastor wrote about it in the paper last week. The idea of the YMCA brings all that together, family and character strengthens those image.

Donnel Daniels

Donnel Daniels said, I am from Duddle Hill, where the drive-by shooting happened. I heard the popping of the gun going off. It was about 30 rounds that went off. I ran out the house and I went over there and I saw the baby on the ground. I picked the baby up and I started praying to God. I picked her up and got in the car to take her to the hospital. I was going about 100 mph, and I was just praying to God, but the baby did not live, she died about an hour later after we arrived at the hospital.

It's sad what happened. He said the only thing that will resolve a problem in the neighborhood, is the neighborhood itself. Number 1, you have to have God in everything you do. I have been through a lot. I've been through the storm, God bought me out, he saved me through that.

Addressing the audience, Mr. Daniels noticed that he was the only one present from Duddle Hill. That's understandable, I know why, he said. It is a close knit community that tries to take care of its own problems. Everyone over there is family. More police will not solve the problems in my neighborhood, Mr. Daniels stated. The neighborhood has to make a difference itself first to solve its problems. No. 1 you have to have God in whatever you do.

Vera Bodison

Ms. Vera Bodison, a city resident on Bailey Street, addressed Council. Ms. Bodison stated she just came tonight to listen to see what was on the hearts and minds of the people in the community. The shootings have occurred in the area where Ms. Bodison lives. She stated, I know that it does not take 300 or 400 people tonight to do the kinds of things we need to do for our community. My main concern as I sat here and listed tonight, I would just like to ask City Council to look at the goals that you have placed on your agenda for the next year and re-assess and re-prioritize your goals. Please, I ask you don't do business as usually. Before this hit our community, you had your business set up, but since this has hit our community, I am asking you please don't do business as usual. When you think about what you will be doing in the next few weeks or months, ask the question, is this going to have a human aspect. Is it going to help somebody? Is it going to bring us together? Ms. Bodison stated, we are in a reactionary state right now. Let's do the right thing, please from this point on just ask some questions. Are these things going to help bring our community together? We need to stop being so judgmental. We need to learn from each other. She stated, sometimes it takes a lot to get our attention. I do not want these three people to die in vain. We need to come together. Whatever we plan let it have a human aspect. Let's not go and do a sidewalk, not right now. Right now we need to have a human aspect, bring people together, loving on each other. I believe in prayer, prayer changes things. Stop trying to drive love, but show it. What are you doing for the children and the young people? Why don't we have a play pool? I came here to listen, but my cup is running over right now. Please don't keep the same agenda, that's all I am asking. Think out of the box.

Eddie Domingues

Mr. Domingues, a resident on Weikers Street, told the audience we are coming into a new year and politicians say we are not going to raise taxes. The taxes are an investment for the town. He suggested that the city hire more police officers, and have more volunteers. Give them something to do, because after all, they have to work. This helps the community. If we don't invest in the town, we have nothing.

Jeraldo Brown

Mr. Jeraldo Brown, owner of Koger's Mortuary in Walterboro, then addressed Council. Mr. Brown addressed the tragic deaths of a 20 month old child, a 21 year old man and a 45 year-old man. He said, one thing that we should be concerned with is family value. There has been many times I have heard people say, well, if the police would do that or if City Council would do that. Instead of pointing at individuals and focus on ourselves Walterboro would be so much better. I grew up in a home with values, traditions and love. If we don't get over ourselves and do it quickly, we will be burying a lot more people in Walterboro, because a community has been infected with violence and hatred. If we don't get pass ourselves, we can't reach out to them. Until we have been there, how can we go into their avenue and talk to them and convince them. If we don't show them a better way, how would they know? Help these people out. What I am saying is Walterboro look at ourselves, because if we don't look at ourselves Walterboro is on the down fall very quickly. When we leave here tonight Walterboro, let's evaluate ourselves, because if we don't evaluate ourselves and actually look at it - when we think we are up, we are really way down at the bottom. We need more of what Mr. Donnel Daniels has offered. They want to hear people who have been there.

Jeanette Moyer

Ms. Moyer told Council she was with United Way. She is a resident of the county. She said all of this has occurred right around you. As a matter of fact, a year ago the first couple of drive-bys were on Fourth Street and Sixth Street. I am constantly calling and reporting problems to dispatch. What I hear tonight is a community that is in pain. Mr. Daniels has to go back to his community and tomorrow there will be a lot of people on the street where he lives, who will know exactly what was said here tonight. Those people are going to be watching to see what we are going to do in response to that or if we are to just say, 'well let's have another meeting'. Let's form a couple of committees. They need action and we need action and we need it now. I challenge all of you to do as much as I personally have done since I moved here. I have mentored through my job over 40 men and women from this community, most who do not have their GED. Three fourths of them are now gainfully employed here in this county. These are 18 to 32 year olds. Right now I am mentoring students at the middle school through the lunch buddy program where we eat lunch with a child. This is for one 30-45 minute time period every other week. Right now that program only has 20 members. We've got to start doing things like that. We have got to learn as a community to live together and to unite and to work together to address these issues.

Horace Simmons

Mr. Simmons stated that he has worked with kids for 30 to 35 years. I have worked with kids for many years in other cities. What has been said tonight is good. Let's not leave it here. Let's pick it up take it and continue - not every 10 years or 5 years, but continue quite often. We can go into each other's communities and just be with them. Be with each other. Get together, they are all human beings. We are affected about what is going on in Walterboro. We must continue. We can't just talk, walk out the door and come back in 10 years and pick up when somebody else gets hurt. Let's not let this stop. Mr. Simmons invited everyone to attend a community meeting on Saturday, December 5, at 12:00 P.M. at 121 Harper Street. Mr. Simmons stated that he runs the program called Community Action Line Against Violence for the last 10 years and has saved over 300 kids from jail, the streets or the graveyard.

Mayor Young then invited all Council Members to give closing remarks.

Council Member Lohr thanked everyone for coming. He stated I could not be happier that everything you have said was conciliatory and that's a good place to start.

Councilman Smalls stated, as I look at your faces and see the reflections on your face, it tells me some things. One thing I want to mention is a fact, the age group from 18-25 believes they can do what they want to do, when they want to do it and where they want to do it. We've got to accept that. You see, we are living in a different trend now. They think different, they act different, they dress different, they are young in appearance and that's a different trend and we've got to work with that. I hope that each one of us will go back to our own communities and organize. So, you've got to strengthen your community. The group 18-25 feels that they have taken over all the communities, and we feel that we have lost the community and both are true. My question is if its not us to take it back, tell me who and if it's not here, tell me where and if it's not now, tell me when.

Councilman Parker felt that a lot of good ideas had been exchanged. Like Ms. Bodison has said, I believe we've got to think out of the box.

Councilman Lucas said it was great to see the crowd. He said, I believe it's got to be a community effort to solve our problems and it's going to be a combination of the intervention, prevention and law enforcement to do that. But it has to start at home with the parents. The parents have got to take control of their kids and teach them right from wrong, but it's something we all have to work together towards.

Councilman Peters said he felt all the comments that were made were good comments. Very positive things have been said. I am like Mr. Simmons. I don't want to leave the room tonight and it be left here. I'd like to see it carried through. Some of the things that were brought up tonight, Council has already been discussing. The staff and City Police have already started working on some of these ideas that are out there. What we need from the community is when there is a problem or you think there is a potential problem in your neighborhood, pick up the phone and call us. Mr. Peters stated, Mrs. Bodison I assure you it's not going to be business as usual.

Councilman Buckner then said he really appreciated the community coming out and voicing concerns about an issue that has gripped our community. From a spiritual standpoint, we overcome evil with good, and where there's violence we should be calling for peace. Mr. Buckner gave a brief history of the story of Walterboro. The point from the story was that Walterboro was originally a healing ground - it's a place where people came to be healed. Now, it's changed to where we have deaths and shootings and we need to change that. Secondly, Walterboro is a city of hospitality and we have compassion. Walterboro has always been about faith and family. What I don't want to see is that we have another meeting, and another meeting and nothing happens - business as usual. That's has to stop, we've got to do the right thing. The victims of the families need counselors right now. That's what they need right now and that whole area over there needs love.

Mayor Young thanked everyone for coming out tonight. We appreciate all of your input and we will move forward from here.

There being no further business to consider, a motion to adjourn was made by Council Member Parker, seconded by Council Member Lucas and passed unanimously. The Mayor adjourned the meeting at 8:50 P.M. Notice of this meeting was distributed to all local media and posted on the City Hall bulletin board at least twenty-four hours prior to meeting time.

Respectfully,

Betty J. Hudson

Betty J. Hudson
City Clerk

APPROVED: January 12, 2010