

Let's Talk: Two Meetings

written by Newspark Team | July 25, 2018



On July 12, I attended the City's public briefing on its public safety plan for the August 11-12 weekend, which will mark the one-year anniversary of last year's coordinated white supremacist attack on Charlottesville. A healthy crowd of citizens and press gathered for roughly an hour at Mount Zion First African Baptist Church for the first in a series of similar meetings. City, county and UVA staff representing the unified central command sat at a table, passing a microphone back and forth to introduce their roles and to explain their preparations and organizational approaches to keeping the public safe. My predecessor at Charlottesville Tomorrow, Brian Wheeler, moderated the conversation as the City's Director of Communications and coordinator of the #resilientville outreach program. A couple of things struck me. The agency staff members have mostly come into their current roles since last August. Also, the elected officials present played no role in the meeting, in contrast to last year's lead-up. It is clear that this year, the preparations are a staff-led initiative. The public safety officers seemed prepared to interact with a potentially combative audience, and nearly all of the audience comments showed that grief, anger, and mistrust are still at the forefront of conversations with local government staff. Questions became speeches, confessions, and accusations, all with an underlying question built in: Why should we trust you?

The City's failure to protect its citizens, law enforcement's unwillingness to intervene in violent confrontations, and the perceived equivalencies with which white supremacists and counter-protesters have been treated by the judicial system left raw wounds that have infected over the past year. In the most basic terms, the public still wants and needs- and even specifically asked for- an apology from its government before it will respect its staff in public. And yet it's not even clear who could offer that apology today.

Another meeting and another story. When I attended the Charlottesville City Council's July 2 meeting, the public comment period was also characterized by mistrust and anger. But the tone was as genial as it has been over the past year, the July lull and the weight of time mellowing attitudes if not messages. By the time the first working item on the agenda got underway, much of crowd had cleared out. Among those who remained was a large delegation of architects, planners, and lawyers from Stony Point Design/Build, led by principal Chris Henry, who awaited their public hearing on a Special Use Permit for their development at the site of the old Monticello Dairy at the corner of 10th Street and

Grady Avenue.

The project is sited in the 10th and Page neighborhood in the Preston Avenue entry corridor—one of the front lines of the city’s discussion about affordable housing, displacement, and zoning in historically African-American neighborhoods. After a presentation from the developers, City Council voted 4-1 to approve the permit, clearing the way for Stony Point to break ground. The decision could set a precedent for upgrading height and density allotments in return for an increased number of affordable units and a promise to create local jobs.

Mayor Nikuyah Walker offered an explanation for her dissenting vote, saying she would oppose any development project that doesn’t resolve the pressure on affordable housing driving the displacement of residents in gentrifying neighborhoods like 10th and Page. She explained that while she was impressed by Stony Point’s approach to the Dairy Central project, she had requested 75 affordable units instead of 20, a longer than 10-year commitment to affordability, and a lower than 80% multiplier on the Area Median Income index that sets the pricing. It’s a similar position to the one Mayor Walker articulated at Virginia Humanities Unmasking #Charlottesville (32:00) event in June, when she questioned the basic assumptions of the Piedmont Housing Alliance proposal to redevelop Friendship Court.

Councilor Kathy Galvin, one voice among the majority, explained her vote by noting that Stony Point had run a model community engagement process, and the project would exceed the City’s minimum requirement for affordable units by nearly four times while contributing a scale of tax revenue (an estimated \$ million per year) that the City desperately needs to pursue its own agenda. Councilor Heather Hill said simply, “The ball’s in our court regarding deeper affordability,” a reference to the City’s upcoming discussions concerning comprehensive planning and a range of development and affordable housing decisions the Councilors will consider in upcoming months, including a tax abatement plan that could make Dairy Central units more affordable.

The connection between what happened last August and the City’s nitty-gritty planning and zoning conversations may seem indirect, but it is precisely the connection between the fight against overt racism and the dismantling of structural inequalities that are effectively written into our laws and procedures. While activists and elected officials have both emphasized the importance of expanding affordable housing, the conversations must take on a more central and public role before broader solutions can be successfully implemented. Hopefully, by the time the city adopts a new comprehensive plan, we will have forged a stronger and more coherent dialogue between the public, its elected officials, and the staff leaders largely responsible for implementing change.