

Statement re Mike Bianca

There are few issues in recent years with which the public has been more interested and involved than the saga of Mike Bianca as Chief of Police. He was chosen against the known desires of many members of the Department because of his great public support and, last summer, when the police union tried to oust him there was another, spontaneous expression of support for retaining him.

The police union chose to attack Mike not on his approach to policing but on his supposed management weaknesses and the Mayor and City Administrator have accepted that way of framing the conflict between Mike and the union, culminating in their recent actions to remove him from his position because of alleged deficiencies in his management of the Department.

As a citizen I feel this would be a tremendous blow to the community's desire for humane, community-oriented policing and the loss of a uniquely qualified individual to lead that mission.

As an organization and management consultant I find it disappointing, or worse, to see the Mayor and City Administrator commit a cardinal sin of management practices, namely to enable and encourage members of the Department to complain to them behind Mike's back. Remember Mike works for the Administrator and the Administrator's boss is the Mayor. This is a well known recipe for undermining a manager and it has been the perfect complement to the union's strategy of trying to attack Mike without attacking the policing philosophy he embodies.

In either role I am also concerned about the timing and urgency of their most recent attempts to remove him when a comprehensive analysis of the entire police function is past due, a new city administrator is coming on board soon and a public forum on the proposed Community Policing Ordinance has been delayed for several months. This seems to be a time of opportunity and promise for resolving the differences between members of the Department and the community, not a moment to force out a highly popular and talented Chief at the prodding of some members of the Department who were opposed to his selection in the first place.

What's the rush?

Are the Mayor and City Administrator sacrificing the Chief to placate a contingent of the police force? Shouldn't we all be trying to find a greater resolution to the problem? It's natural to have different views on issues such as policing, and internal promotions are notoriously difficult to carry out successfully. But why not address all our issues concerning policing and invite all interested parties to the table?

I suggest the Council consider the following steps:

1. Immediately suspend negotiations with Chief Bianca concerning his early retirement and/or any attempts to fire him or persuade him to resign, pending completion of the rest of these steps...

2. Call an Executive Session to review the Mayor and City Administrator's specific documented concerns about Chief Bianca's job performance. Also review the way in which the Mayor and City Administrator have managed his performance, i.e how did they set expectations? How did they give feedback? What help have they offered him in improving in the areas they felt were deficient? And what specifically has been the relationship and communications between members of the Department and the Mayor, City Administrator and City Attorney, who appears to have been participating in this process in a management role?

3. When the PERF Report arrives, distribute it to all interested parties in the community and then set up a process for community-wide discussion of its findings as well as the proposed Community Policing Ordinance, with members of the Council, City Administration and the Police Department in attendance. Adjust the timing of this process so that the new City Administrator can participate or at least be present at its concluding phase. It would be a good idea if this process were managed and facilitated by an independent organization, preferably a local one such as Peace Works or Mediation Works.

4. Allow the new City Administrator to arrive, and make one of her top priorities to familiarize herself with the policing situation, including the Chief's selection and subsequent events, the PERF report and the Community Policing Ordinance - and then propose to the Council a plan for reducing conflict and providing the community the kind of policing it truly wants.

After taking these steps it should be clear to all affected parties, including the Chief, whether it is mutually desirable to continue his relationship with the City.

The future of Mike Bianca as Chief is too important to this community to be decided in a precipitous or narrowly defined way. The community is already engaged in the policing issue. Let's involve them fully rather than excluding them from the decision-making process.

John Stromberg 3/4/06

Statement to City Council 4/4/06

Good Evening Mayor Morrison and Council Members:

My name is Holly East, and I am the Executive Director of Peace House. I am here tonight to voice our mission: to serve our local community by holding an awareness and understanding of the needs of peace and justice, acting locally to provide an avenue for individual and group participation of achieving peace.

The pressured resignation of Mike Bianca is the outcome of months of unresolved conflict. Many relationships with City officials and the police department have been harmed in this process, and there is clearly a sense of betrayal that demands repair. It is unclear whether this situation can be rectified, but there are certainly lessons to be learned moving forward.

We understand that this is a personnel matter, that decisions of this nature are difficult for the administrator and the mayor to make, and do not come lightly.

We understand that our police force was mired in conflict before our chief took the helm, and that many of its officers do not reside in Ashland.

We understand that the people of Ashland have spoken out in support of a police department that embraces the concept of community policing.

We believe that Mike Bianca enjoys the respect and admiration that comes from his 20 years of service to the community, and that he and his family have endured an enormous amount of stress because this controversy was not resolved sooner.

Finally, we understand that the Mayor receives counsel from both the administrator and the city attorney, but that final decisions rest with council confirmation.

And that is why Peace House chose to speak to you this evening.

We ask you to aspire to a set of loftier attitudes and goals. We urge each of you to consider ways to create a win/win outcome. True conflict

resolution does not create new problems in its wake; it allows all parties to move forward in a spirit of reconciliation and understanding.

Does removing Mike Bianca resolve age-old conflicts within the Ashland Police Department?

Has this decision clarified whether community policing is a policy or a philosophy?

Did the process reassure the citizens of Ashland that we elected a city government that represents the interests of the community?

Can we conclude that Mike Bianca and his family have been made whole?

I ask you these questions tonight because we believe you possess the power and the authority to accomplish all of those things.

This situation provides you with a rare opportunity to be both transforming and redemptive. You have a chance to model that you possess the requisite dedication and commitment to reach to the best interests of our community. Our village experiences the outcomes of your leadership, and tonight you see its reflection. The welfare of our community is in your hands.

Although many have been bruised by the process, your renewed decision to walk through this conflict rather than away from it can reunite us. Peace House urges you to make every effort to implement mediation, nonviolent communication and listening projects to resolve this discord.

Mohandus Ghandi put it well: Man becomes great exactly in the degree to which he works for the welfare of his fellow men.

Thank you.

Holly East, Executive Director
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