

MINUTES OF MARION CITY COUNCIL
SPECIAL MEETING
CITY COUNCIL CHAMBERS
THURSDAY, JUNE 24, 2022 at 12:00 P.M

A special meeting was held by Marion City Council on June 24, 2022 at 12:00 p.m. in which Mayor Ashley Brady presided. Council members Michael Baker, Donny Gerald, Mayor Pro Tem Emerson Hunt and Tassie Lewis were present. City staff present were City Administrator Alan Ammons and Chief Tony Flowers. Other officials present were Marion County Administrator Tim Harper and Marion County Sheriff Brian Wallace.

Mayor Ashley Brady called the meeting to order, gave the opening prayer and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

COMMUNITY SAFETY AWARENESS:

Mayor Brady stated that council is meeting today along with a special guest to address the issue of violence in the City of Marion. He stated the police chief and sheriff are doing everything in their power to help curb the violence. Mayor Brady stressed that citizens need to call 911 and report anything they see happening in their neighborhoods. As well as anything that may potentially happen in their neighborhoods so that it may be investigated proactively. If you see something, say something. This will help the investigators in preventing incidents and solving cases more efficiently.

Special Agent Richard Johnson with SLED was present to address council regarding community safety awareness. Special Agent Johnson stated that it is SLED's responsibility to

assist any law enforcement agency as needed. He noted that he has worked in law enforcement for over 30 years throughout the state of SC, and he has interacted with many police chiefs, sheriffs, citizens and social activist groups. He highlighted the current trend of police officer shortages which poses a problem for the community as a whole. He stated that over time he has witnessed that officer visibility is very effective in preventing crime. He stated that municipalities have to find the resources and funds to ensure that public safety is important.

He stated that to address gang violence effectively, you must have an adequate number of police officers and the support of the community to resolve the problems. You must engage the community so that they feel comfortable sharing information to help solve crimes. Officers must do a better job of building trust with the community. He further stated that the law enforcement agencies and officials must work together to address these issues.

Mayor Brady stated the keeping police staffed is paramount and the City has provided employee retention bonuses which increased the starting salary of law enforcement officers, and provided a substantial raise to officers and first responders to show that the employees are valued. He also stated that the City has a few crime watch committees, and is working to create a third committee that will meet on a monthly basis. Mayor Brady asked for meeting suggestions for these committees. Special Agent Johnson commented on one community in which their community relations officer stays in constant contact with the committee captains. These groups utilize technology to communicate suspicious activity to each other. This allows the officers to see the communications and be proactive prior to

anything being reported. He stated that many people are afraid to speak up due to fear of retaliation.

Councilwoman Tassie Lewis stated that her district, as well as Councilman Michael Baker's district experience gun discharges daily and they stay in constant communication. She stated that the shortage of officers is understood and incentives have been created to encourage people to apply. She stated that gang violence and the access to assault weapons is spreading throughout the community. She stated that the community must get involved because someone has to know what is going on inside their homes and neighborhoods. Councilwoman Lewis stated that ways to remain anonymous have been discussed, and purpose of this meeting is to collaborate among the police chief, sheriff and council to help save the community and minimize crime.

Special Agent Johnson stated that it is important to bring awareness to violence and come together with law enforcement and the community to share what's going on. If not, crime will become normalized.

Special Agent Johnson stressed the importance of police presence several times and added that the presence should be strategically assigned to areas so that the entire jurisdiction has officer visibility.

Councilman Donny Gerald asked if police substations are effective in addressing these issues. The City has had some in the past, but they are no longer active due to shortage in staff. Special Agent Johnson stated that it depends on the size of the area; however, they can be

effective in allowing a quicker response time to crime. He stated that it's very effective for officers to get out in the community and engage with citizens regularly rather than waiting on crimes to happen.

Mayor Pro Tem Emerson Hunt commented on the large number of weapons available on the streets which leads more often to gun fights rather than physical altercations. He asked for advice on how to deal with this matter. Special Agent Johnson stated that elected officials would need to consider passing legislation to deal with the gun violence. He further stated that the community must get involved to deal with the gang violence, and parents must get involved to get an understanding of who their kids are hanging out with and where they are going. He suggested that parents set curfews. He also explained how the generational gap may be a factor in the current violence. He stated that no one entity can solve these issues, it must be a collaboration of the community and agencies working together.

Councilman Gerald commented on the repeat offenders that continually commit the crimes after being released. Special Agent Johnson stated that law enforcement has to continue doing their job to the best of their ability to send the offenders to court, and not get frustrated if they are released.

Mayor Brady commented that it's going to take a collaborative effort to address this issue which means getting the City, community, and churches involved. Special Agent Johnson reiterated that building community trust is key to gaining their support. Mayor Brady thanked Special Agent Johnson for coming to share this great information with Council.

Chief Tony Flowers also thanked him and stated that some very good points were shared. Chief Flowers stated that they he can't use the officer shortage as an excuse, because they are doing as much as they can with the manpower available. He stated that Sheriff Brian Wallace has always offered any help needed, and they have a great working relationship. He agreed that it takes community involvement to address the issues, and people must speak up.

Chief Flowers commented that the older generation is fearful of the younger generation because of all the shooting, and they don't understand the possible consequences of not speaking up. He stated that the young generation is glorifying the fact of shooting the guns, but not seeing the after effects of what it does to families when they lose a loved one. Chief Flowers also stated that there are community members that do speak out and they remain anonymous; however, there are many that see much more but fear being labeled a snitch if they speak up. He commented on cases where video footage shows several witnesses standing around during a crime, but no one will cooperate with law enforcement to provide information.

Chief Flowers expressed concerns of how technology plays a part in distracting officers where they become more reactive than proactive to crimes. He reiterated that these issues require a community wide effort, and noted that crime watch meetings are held twice a month to discuss issues. Councilman Gerald asked Chief Flowers if he thinks that rewards for information would be effective in encouraging witnesses to speak up. Chief Flowers stated he has not considered it, but it wouldn't hurt.

Mayor Pro Tem Hunt expressed his appreciation to Chief Flowers, Sheriff Wallace, and Special Agent Johnson for all they do in the law enforcement field. Chief Flowers thanked Special Agent Johnson for all that SLED does to help the City. He commented that the current issues and police shortage are not a city, county or state problem but rather a nationwide problem.

Councilman Michael Baker asked if the information drop boxes are still available for citizens to report crimes. Chief Flowers stated that they are no longer being used. Councilwoman Tassie Lewis suggested that the boxes be reinstated for citizen use. Council also discussed the possibility of using mobile apps to report crimes, and also having something available for elderly citizens that are not tech savvy.

Sheriff Brian Wallace reiterated the comments made by Chief Flowers and Special Agent Johnson that there is a current crisis with violent crimes in our nation and in our communities. He commented on a recent interview he did with the Wall Street Journal regarding crime in rural America. He noted that crime in rural America exploded during the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, at which time he saw the highest number of homicides that he has seen in his entire 23-year law enforcement career. Many of the crimes involved members of the same household, associates, and those who deal with mental health issues. He agreed that it takes a collaborative effort, the visibility of law enforcement in the community, and officer retention improvements. Sheriff Wallace stated that mental health has to be addressed in the rural communities as well. In closing, he stated that the cities and towns of Marion County must stick

together to address the issues of the community and keep the citizens safe. He thanked the City for inviting him to be a part of this discussion.

Councilwoman Tassie Lewis thanked everyone for being there and stating that this was a much-needed discussion. She hopes that these discussions will continue in the future, and include more community leaders.

ADJOURNMENT

Hearing no further discussion, Mayor Brady thanked everyone for attending and adjourned the meeting.

Mayor Ashley Brady

City Clerk Lakesha Y. Shannon