

High Point City Council
July 20, 2015
Transcript
Public Comment Period

Sage Shioma: My name is Sage Shioma and I reside at 3214 Brassfield Road in Greensboro. I'd like to say good evening to the Mayor and Members of Council. I want to speak in regards to my connection to Al Heggins and the Department of Human Relations. I'd like to say by definition of change, a...it is someone who alters human capability or organizational systems to achieve a higher degree of output or self-actualization beginning with the end in mind, the goal of a change agent is obviously to make changes that stick. The result of change agents' activity is to enable people to do more, be more, or find a new and better perspective on their lives. Sometimes this latter definition or idea becomes the foundation for future change which achieves outcomes that were previously not attainable. A change agent lives in the future, not just the present.

Al Heggins' approach could serve as a model for other directors of Human Relations to emulate because to have a Human Relations Department ignore the barriers to developing constructive, positive relationships amongst the citizens and public servants would make that department a mere stage prop. So in the recent events across America, there is a call to action for all stakeholders and I'd like to say that a change agent is fueled by passion and inspires passion in others. I've had the opportunity to experience the young people who have participated in student commissioners and past student commissioners and they have, as a result, been instilled with a passion and a sense of hope that there is still decency in the world and that they have a vital role in maintaining that decency. They also know that as future public leaders, it is imperative that they are trained in social justice and racial equity strategy so that all constituents can be served adequately. High Point has been noted for utilizing social justice models in the past to address most notably the drug market strategy. Al Heggins is more than qualified to put High Point on the map again by assuring that the narrative is expanded so that those who are impacted are heard and can partake in finding viable solutions to the problems that are not just here, but everywhere. Her reach far extends the Triad in High Point. Al Heggins prides herself as an advocate for children and that is a legacy that no one or nothing can take away. The student commissioners presented at the national conference and they were approached by educators from all across the country asking them to please...could you come to our campus...could you present? We need leaders such as yourself. [beep] I'd like to end by saying that they are not just our future leaders, they are our leaders and they are taking note of how business is conducted, of how people are treated, how decisions are made in their best interest or in some cases not. Thank you.

Victoria Kovba: Good evening. My name is Victoria Kovba. I want to begin by saying that I fully support Al Heggins and Tony Lowe as mentors and continuing to help me grow in my life. Now in front of me sit mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, yet over all else authorities that strongly influence my community. We have many people in whom we love and strive to protect on a daily basis, but I urge you to note that Human Relations does that. We protect the beloved people of our community. Our country in which we love has fallen victim to

bigotry, oppression, discrimination, riots and police brutality. This has become separation of the people, yet the Pledge of Allegiance states, “for the Republic for which it stands, One Nation under God, Indivisible, for Liberty and Justice for all.” But on the contrary when you look at the news it doesn’t seem like we are living up to it and that’s exactly what we do. We contract the division. Abraham Lincoln so wisely stated, “a house divided cannot stand.” We, as a Human Relations Department, believe we cannot let our house be divided, but rather, we must help bring love, understanding and tolerance. So I urge that if you want to protect all of whom you love, then please don’t let Human Relations slip from your hands before we can no longer unite the divided house. To conclude, I recommend not to under estimate the power of good that Human Relations has done in not only High Point, but North Carolina and the United States. I would suspect you don’t want to be the fault for a deteriorating United States of American and therefore restoring Human Relations will not only come back to honor you, but in place a loving peaceful community in which you and your families may live in. Thank you.

Sara Palmer: My name is Sara Palmer and I live at 3129 Rockingham Road and Jay Wagner is my councilman. I work at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church on W. Farriss Avenue and I’m a member of the Interfaith Affairs Committee. What attracted me to High Point five years ago was the international flavor of the city. Flags from so many nations lining the streets, signs in many different languages proclaiming “Welcome”. And I am a foreign immigrant myself. Though, of course, you could never tell, right? I have always been so grateful for the welcome that I have received. All my family of origin are back in England, so when people are friendly and helpful to me, that really means a lot. So I want to extend the same warm welcome that I have received and the practical help to the immigrants coming to our International City of High Point. I want to be one of those who speaks to bring together the community so that we can create the most livable, safe and prosperous community in America. That’s why I have been delighted to be part of the Interfaith Affairs Committee for the last two years. Some of the members of our committee are here today. We have the Baha’i faith. The Christian faith. The Jewish faith and the Sikh faith represented here today. Thank you. I am extremely thankful that the city paid for me to go to Canada to attend Canada’s largest world religions conference back in 2013 and we were tasked with learning how they did it so we could here in High Point our own world religions forum, which we did last November. There were over 100 people who came. Eight different major world religions were represented. We had round table discussions. We shared food together and there were about 10% of the people from St. Mary’s and they thought it was outstanding. I think that that world religions forum is an important part of our welcoming the various immigrant groups to High Point because being a member of the faith committee—a faith community is an integral part of our lives. Since the Interfaith Affairs Committee has worked under the oversight and with the administrative and logistical support from the High Point Human Relations Department, I want to say how very important the full-time help of the Human Relations Department is ...[beep]...for our continued work. Without such support from people experience in working across cultures and faiths, our work would not be able to continue as effectively. Thank you.

Barbara Collins: Good evening Mr. Mayor, members of City Council, Mr. City Manager. My name is Barbara Collins. I live at 107 Crestwood Circle here in High Point. I serve as lay leader at B’Nai Israel Synagogue here in High Point, the Triad’s oldest Jewish community. This evening I am here as the previously appointed vice chair of the Human Relations Commission of

the City of High Point. I am here to notify all appropriate city officials that the Human Relations Commission of the City of High Point is in violation of Article A, Section 2-3-2 as mandated by the City of High Point. That particular ordinance defines the responsibilities and the tasks of the Human Relations Commission. However, since the paid leave of the two employees in the Human Relations Department, the Human Relations Commission has been very unsuccessful in finding out any pertinent information regarding the tasks assigned to it as outlined in Section 2-3-2, Article A. We are, as a city, in danger of losing our Welcoming America status. We were named one of fifty cities in the United State of America as a Welcoming City and the reason that we are in danger of losing that eligibility is because the events that we had scheduled have been cancelled or postponed. We have been unable to function as a commission. Your proposed and adopted budget included funding for your Human Relations Department. I heard Mr. Demko refer to the findings of the investigation, which I'm not going to touch, but I am going to say that currently the staffing in the Human Relations Department consists of someone from the Communications Department sitting down there and playing receptionist, but we're not given any information. Any complaints, anything at all is referred to the State, we are not given anything. [beep] I hope that Mr. Demko's comment regarding directing Ms. Heggins and Mr. Lowe to return to work does mean that the department will be staffed. Additionally, as I said, I was appointed to the Human Relations Commission. My appointment actually ended May of 2014. Currently you have exactly four commissioners who are appointed as of right now. If you look at your list, their eligibility does not end until either next year or the year after. But the chair, Jason Yates, and myself as vice-chair, we are both eligible for reappointment; however, as I said our appointments ended. Therefore, not only do you not have a functioning Human Relations Commission, you do not have a Human Relations Commission as so outlined under your statutes. Thank you very much.

Dave Gwendari: Honorable Mr. Mayor, respective council members and everybody. My name is Dave Gwendari and I live at 4403 Dogwood Court, High Point, NC. I volunteer in my community as a vice president as Society of [inaudible] in High Point. Also a student leader at UNC-G. I heard about Human Relations and my community was concerned about, you know, they have so many issues and problems that we come to like.....in our community we have a thousand people and I answered whatever questions they have. They are concerned about where do we get answers from since the Human Relations Department is upside down. My point is like they come with all the questions to me, so how am I to answer them if the Human Relations Department is shut down. Thank you.

Narayan Khadka: Mr. Mayor and Council Members. My name is Narayan Khadka. I live at 3728 Pemberton Way, High Point, NC 27265. My representative is Jim Davis. I'm here to share my thought about the Human Relations. I am serving in the interfaith committee as a member and also I represent the Nepalese Center and we represent about 500 Nepalese here in High Point. Human Relations and the Human Relations Department has been very helpful for our community. Since High Point city and Human Relation launched integrated community, building integrated community project, we have been involved in the process. Our communities—not only our Nepalese communities—we were able to reach out to the Burmese, Sudanese, and other communities in making sure that they are included in our city. I will tell you that I am proud of the cities of this country and the process for integrating newcomers like Nepalese immigrants was very powerful and we were impressed. We started a religion forum

that has been very successful and were able to bring the people here in December from diverse faiths and religion backgrounds. And also we already heard about the Student Human Relations Commission that was the model in the United States. We see very few instances in the United States that have a student human relations. So those good things that we claim, High Point is an international city and already has been started and we want to continue. We want to move forward. We want to do more progress in High Point city. So let's work together to make change...[beep]....and include our international population here in High Point. Thank you so much.

Charles Hall: My name is Charles Hall. I live at 512 Manor Drive, which is Ward 1, Councilman Golden. Mayor and Council Members, I am here this evening as a representative and a member of the Baha'i faith in High Point as well as a member of the city's Interfaith Affairs Committee since 2012. The Interfaith Affairs Committee is a part of the Human Relations Commission and we have relied upon the outstanding leadership and support of the City of High Point's Human Relations Department in order to fulfill our mission. Just as the Human Relations Department attempts to foster a conciliatory atmosphere between the citizens, the businesses, and the city offices in High Point, it has utilized some of those same skills to build a strong foundation of trust and understanding among the city's numerous and varied faith communities. As you are no doubt aware, the City of High Point has been identified as an International City and nationally recognized for its efforts to be respectful of and inclusive to all its citizens.

In addition, the City prides itself as one with deep religious background and established the Interfaith Affairs Committee as a platform to foster dialogue and increase knowledge and understanding among the diverse faith groups in the city's long residents, as well as those who have chosen to call High Point their home more recently. We are talking about a vital service of education, mediation and reconciliation. So vital that without a strong competent staff in the Human Relations Department, the Commission and the Interfaith Affairs Committee would be severely hampered from fulfilling their goals. Since the Interfaith Affairs Committee has gained momentum, now is the time to keep its force going forward. Thank you very much.

Steven Dudash: Honorable Mayor and ladies and gentlemen of Council, my name is Steven Dudash. I live at 900 Johnson Street. Actually I'm just a little shy of 35 years at that address. So, as you can imagine, I've seen a lot of changes and different things going on. The reason I'm here tonight is I'm here to praise the Council and members of Council for finally deciding to take action on the traffic issues and problems that we've had on Johnson Street all these years. I know Mr. Bencini and I know for certain that Mr. McDonald will attest to the fact that I've had conversations with both of them. I, and several long-time members of the street about trying to address these issues that we've had with the traffic. The volume issue to me personally has not been that big of a deal. It's been the speed of the traffic and one of the things that we always try and ask the city to do is to break up that long, straight stretch on Johnson between Lexington and Parkway. Now with the suggestion of putting the three-way stop at Farriss that will break up the long stretch so we may reduce the drag racing, speeding and that type of thing. However, one point or two points that I have a little bit of concern about: one is I don't know, five-ten years ago, it seemed to be a younger generation than now and I can't include myself anymore in that, where there seemed to be a thing with the younger generation to run stoplights and run STOP

signs. Now it seems it's not just the younger generation, it's everybody. Guilford County in particular....I've traveled around different places and I still travel around quite a bit. I don't see the enormous number of people running stoplights and stop signs in other cities as I do in High Point in particular. So unless we have the enforcement....and yes, it's going to help to have that long, straight stretch broken up, but I really believe we have an issue that we need to address about enforcement and trying to encourage people not to run the stop signs and stoplights. The other concern I have is how this type of a change might affect Market traffic and our Market visitors because as I indicated in the letter that I sent to Council, I think that Johnson Street is a viable asset to High Point. It's been for thirty some years that I've been there. I feel that it's been an important, vital aspect to High Point and as far as moving people in and moving people out. [beep] However, this is something that has to be done and I hope that you'll take time to address it. Thank you very much.

Jas Atwal: Honorable Mayor, Council Members, ladies and gentlemen, I'm Jas Atwal. I live at 113 Scarlett Drive in High Point. I'm also secretary of the [inaudible] Association Tribe and I'm representing the Sikh community and the Interfaith Affairs Committee. My council member is Jim Davis and he's here. I don't want to take much time because this has already been emphasized by the previous speakers about the importance of the Human Relations Department. Under the leadership of Al Heggins and Tony Lowe, it brought many.....even when she was awarded the Champion of the Change at the White House. Certainly it affords us an opportunity to know the practices of the other faiths and the previous world religions forum, which will help. Even though you may have some other responsibilities like a champion or a leader, which was Al Heggins. She may have some other responsibilities, but we need to let her continue to coordinate the activities of the Interfaith Affairs Committee so that in the coming years, High Point, which is known as the International City. I don't want to take much more time, but I want to emphasize the need to have a Human Relations Department supporting the activities of the Interfaith Affairs Committee. Thank you.

Tina Garton: My name is Tina Garton. I live at 1102 Johnson Street and I'm a brand new homeowner. I've had a chance to meet some of our great neighbors and the way I met them was by accidents on our street. High Point has been a beautiful place to move into. It's a wonderful city with everyone here representing the city. I wanted to say I'm nervous first of all. In our home we have a 12-year-old, a 4-year-old, and a handicapped grandmother and this street....the traffic that does not have any cause to stop when they are flying by our homes makes me as nervous standing here in front of you as it does having my four-year-old outside playing in our front yard walking from the car to our house, holding onto her for dear life. I don't know if you've ever stood on Johnson Street to see the racetrack that we live around and if any of our beautiful neighbors ever want to come over and visit our neighborhood to see our wonderful parks, I would hope it would be safe for them to come and see High Point. I have been home while three wrecks happened there. Luckily I have not had to stop to help anyone pull out. They've not had that much physical damage done themselves. We've had a lot of property damage where cars ended up in people's yards. Thank God their families weren't outside enjoying a beautiful day in High Point. To the opposers, if there are any, who would not want us to have a three-way STOP there, we're not concerned with the volume of traffic that comes down the road, it's the speed that scares us. Your cut-through will still be there. No one's taking that away from people who live in High Point, but we're just asking for you who have the ability

to protect our families to do that. We have a homeowner who was recently injured. He's my daughter's rowing coach and he's a father. He got T-boned. And we have elderly people who live in our neighborhoods when they're going across Farriss and Johnson, they can't respond fast enough to the person driving 70 mph and that's not an exaggeration, down our street. It's impossible. Those could be your grandmothers or your children who may be visiting a friend one day and you may not know that they're going down Johnson Street. I'd hate for anyone to get a phone call that they've had an injury because of someone's carelessness driving so fast and all it would take is a stoplight/stop sign. That's it for me.

David Willett: I want to speak to this traffic calming issue. Can I do that now or when?

Mayor Bencini: It's not a public hearing item, I don't believe. There was another gentleman ahead of you and I wouldn't let him go, so I don't think it's fair to let you go.

David Willett: This is important. I tried one other time and I'd like to speak.

Mayor Bencini: We'll see if there's an appropriate time.

Council Member Ewing: Mr. Mayor, I will say that he was at our committee meeting on Wednesday and we informed him that there would be public comment tonight and he could get his comments on that subject heard by Council.

Mayor Bencini: Do you want to wait until it's on the agenda?

Council Member Ewing: That's fine.

Mayor Bencini: When we get to the subject, David, we'll give you a chance to speak. That's the end of our public comment period. Again, if there are people here that want to speak tonight, we're going to allow you to speak, but it will be at the very end of our meeting, after our agenda has been completed. The next item on our agenda are our Consent Agenda items. Mayor Pro Tem Davis.

[end of transcript- Public Comment Period]