

Blacks warn of violence in Roanoke

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ROANOKE — Amid cries that the Roanoke black community had been trained by a history of police and city inaction for years, a group of blacks said Monday the city needs to change its policies or risk the outbreak of violence.

During the recent week-long police holding of a black man, Willie Astrey, without charge or bond, members of the group said that Roanoke City Council and police department spokesmen alone would not right "the wrong done in the past" and asked that Police Chief Floyd Peters be dismissed.

Mayor Henry Speer Bowers said he would not take disciplinary action against the chief, even though he said the imprisonment without charge was a "mistake." He said he and the council believed Peters was doing "a great job under difficult and trying circumstances."

After the meeting, Bowers said those circumstances included having to face much opposition.

THE MAYOR TOLD the group that Roanoke needed to reduce the need for locking and carrying on downtown streets by teenagers of both races. He asked the group to concentrate on that problem, saying later: "I repeat, the black-white issue in Roanoke. We're bigger than that."

But Rudolph Terry, spokesman for a black organization called Concerned Citizens of Randolph County, said the mayor was not really addressing the issue. "Astrey is not the man responsible for all these acts," said Terry.

A week after being taken into custody in connection with a robbery case, Astrey took a polygraph test and was released.

Wilbur Clark, president of the Roanoke NAACP chapter, said Astrey was "harassment" by a trip to his hometown of Franklin, Ga., in an effort by police "to get evidence that the man was guilty." "Should you find the evidence, then get the man."

Speaking up at the meeting, Astrey said, "I got three kids. Look at me. I had a good opportunity for a job, but the police chief ... said I was in jail on suspicion of robbery ... That kept me from getting a job ... I wasn't earning no money, in jail."

Astrey said he was upset, too, that Peters had taken him to Franklin in connection with the case but that the chief would not stop when they passed a man in Rock Hill who could have cleared him. Peters replied he did not stop because he didn't see the man.

Other recent complaints raised at the meeting included allegations that two of every three court defendants were black, even though the city population is only one-third black, and roadblocks being set up regularly near black neighborhoods and only occasionally near white neighborhoods. Bowers answered that the roadblocks had not occurred in two weeks.

"If you people don't do anything, something bad's going to happen," said Gloria Wofford.

Concerning Astrey, Bowers called the problem one of poor communication between whites and blacks and believed that "if more whites would attend meetings like the black community does, we could settle some problems for the city."

IN OTHER ACTION, the council elected Terry and several others to the City Planning Commission, which handles zoning in the city. The Terry family owns a manufacturing plant in Roanoke.

The council also voted to update fire-alarm systems at the city recreational building, which has been cited for several months for safety violations by the state fire marshal's office.

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