



CITY OF MILWAUKEE

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We All Know What “ZIP Code” is Code For

From Alderman Ashanti Hamilton, Alderman Cavalier Johnson, Alderman Nik Kovac, Alderwoman Nikiya Dodd, Alderwoman Milele A. Coggs, Alderman Khalif J. Rainey, Alderwoman JoCasta Zamarripa, Alderwoman Chantia Lewis, Alderman Mark A. Borkowski, Alderman José G. Pérez and Alderman Russell W. Stamper, II

On Monday morning, right before he met with the City Attorney’s office to demand a golden parachute for his retired client, Milwaukee’s former Chief of Police Alfonso Morales, Attorney Frank Gimbel shared his thoughts on the history of policing in Milwaukee. They were profoundly disturbing. He then followed these thoughts with inaccurate and racist remarks about the current make-up of the Board of Fire and Police Commissioners.

We offer this public statement not as a marker in the ongoing negotiations over Mr. Gimbel’s significant monetary demands, but as a simple and clear rebuke to his outrageous comments on the morning news segment of WTMJ radio.

“Well, you may or may not know,” Gimbel told Gene Mueller, “but I served on the Fire and Police Commission in 1977 through 1982, and that was when we had a Police Chief by the name of Harold Breier. He was an old-fashioned law and order guy if ever there was one.”

Chief Breier certainly was old-fashioned. In 1984, two years after Gimbel left the board and during our city’s implementation of federal integration orders for public schools, the *New York Times* reported on our chief this way: “‘We have bused crime all over the city,’ Chief Breier said early last month in an interview with editorial writers. He said that the South Side, a largely white residential neighborhood, ‘now has black crime.’”

The late Milwaukee Journal Sentinel columnist Eugene Kane called Chief Breier “a racist administrator, a borderline fascist, and the man who contributed to the segregated reputation of Milwaukee more than any other.”

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Perhaps Attorney Gimbel has fond memories of those bygone “law and order” days that don’t relate to the well-documented racism and fascism of Breier’s 20-year reign as chief. It’s possible he was merely ignoring, rather than celebrating, Breier’s open support of racial segregation.

But he kept talking.

“During the period of time that I served on that commission,” he recalled, “all of the members of the commission had graduate college degrees or were high officials in labor organizations. There were two lawyers on the panel.”

He clearly intended this to be a contrast to the current composition of the board, which has six members. Two of them, he ought to know, are lawyers, one of whom also served as an administrative law judge and court commissioner. Another has a doctorate in ministry. Two others are, between them, board members of the Milwaukee Area Technical College, the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, the Metropolitan Milwaukee Chamber of Commerce Business Council, the Ethnic Business Coalition of Wisconsin, the Hmong Wisconsin Chamber of Wisconsin, the Latino Health Organization, and the Friends of the Children’s Health Education Center. The sixth has been a member of the International Association of Black Professional Firefighters since 1980 and served as President of the Milwaukee Brotherhood of Firefighters from 2011 - 2015.

If Mr. Gimbel is nostalgic for the days of lawyers, professional certifications, and “high officials” in labor, business, and educational organizations on Milwaukee’s Board of Fire and Police Commissioners, then he needn’t look any further than the current board.

Maybe there is something else that is different about the 2020 commissioners as compared to his memory of four decades ago?

He didn’t wait long to clarify what was on his mind: “Perhaps using Zip Codes to appoint people to that commission rather than IQs may contribute to the kind of faltering steps that they’ve taken in recent years.”

If Mr. Gimbel thought he was concealing his meaning behind clever language, he did a poor job of it. Nonetheless, let us spell it out: none of the six members of Milwaukee's Board of Fire and Police Commissioners are white. In Attorney Gimbel's day, most were.

If Mr. Gimbel meant something else when he divided people by “Zip Code” other than their race, we encourage him to share it. We can't think of what that might be.

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We Can Criticize Each Other Without Being Racist

Our defense of the civilian members of the Board of Fire and Police Commission against racist attacks should not imply that we agree with every decision they have made in the last 12 months.

In fact, a majority of the Common Council sent a letter last December asking them not to proceed with then-Chief Morales's 4-year reappointment via a hastily scheduled special meeting. They did so anyway in a divided vote.

Seven months later, many of us took the extraordinary step of publicly calling for the firing of then-Chief Morales. We did so for many reasons, some of which overlapped with the directives leading to Morales's demotion, some of which didn't.

What that ruling will mean is a matter of negotiation between the City and Mr. Morales and we recognize that public criticism of decisions the board has made - and how they made them - is an inevitable part of such negotiations.

But we ought to criticize each other over policy and process and leave the personal and pejorative out of it.

And, despite some recent disagreements about particular decisions, we prefer a police oversight commission that is willing to hold chiefs accountable and publicly challenge the department.

Back in 1984, after the Common Council passed a resolution condemning then Chief Breier for his racist remarks, he finally retired. It might have been better if the Board of Fire and Police Commissioners of 1977-82 had fired him.