

Police Chief talking points – presented to the Madison Police and Fire Commission – July 22, 2020

Hello and thank you for allowing me the opportunity to address the Police and Fire Commission on what we're looking for in Madison's next police chief. I'm Brian Shah. I've lived in Madison since 2000 and moved to Oakbridge Neighborhood on Madison's far west side in the fall of 2008. I serve on the neighborhood board as the Architectural Review Board chairperson. Others on our board, including our leadership, suggested that I speak to you.

Our neighborhood is around the bend from Tree Lane Family Apartments. My house is approximately 0.2 miles from there. Although we've had some growing pains, I believe that a number of my neighbors share the sentiment that things have vastly improved since June 2018. In fact, I know a number of neighbors that help there, and even my family donates items when we can. But I'm not here to discuss that issue because, in my honest opinion, our neighbors at Tree Lane Family Apartments deserve the opportunities to thrive and be a part of our community.

Instead, I was asked to speak before you in what our neighborhood is looking for in Madison's next police chief. We all know that police departments across this country are under a very scrutinizing microscope. Incidents that involve names like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and even our own Tony Robinson keep resurfacing. In our own progressive city, we want black lives to matter, but we also want the criminal trespassing and grand theft among teens to stop. Our next police chief is walking into a delicate situation, one that will require both compassion and commitment to our community while also trying to maintain peace in the city.

The following is a short list of qualities that I think will be crucial for our next police chief and the future of our police department.

I would prefer a police chief who is willing to review use-of-force policies and improve training so that force is a last-resort. This includes prohibiting the use of choke-holds, tear gas, and lethal force. I'm impressed that our police department already has a *Use of Non-Deadly Force* standard operating procedure in place and posted on its website. I hope that this is the standard, not just another piece of paper.

I would prefer a police chief who is willing to avoid no-knock warrants. I don't want to learn of a fate similar to Breonna Taylor's in my own city, and, being someone of darker skin, I certainly don't want to be the victim of one.

I would prefer a police chief who is willing to increase reporting and transparency. I know the data are there and requestable. I know of a neighbor who used this data to show crime trends in our area. A dashboard on the police department's website showing how our officers engage each call in our community would be a good starting point on this transparency. Also, when an event is happening in our neighborhoods, it's important to share information with us for safety. During the summer of 2018, we had an incident where officers were searching for two armed men, but we didn't have any information, nor were we told to stay inside for our safety.

I would prefer a police chief who is willing to work with community leaders to affect change. These leaders include Michael Johnson of Boys & Girls Club of Dane County, Dr. Ruben Anthony of Urban League of Greater Madison, Henry Sanders of Madison 365, Karen Menendez Collier of Centro Hispano, and Dr. Jack Daniels of Madison College, to name a few. I know at least three of these leaders personally: I studied with one of them and eventually worked for him, I volunteered for and rode bikes with another, and I currently work for the third. Their insights will help build bridges for inclusivity and trust.

I would prefer a police chief who is willing to change the police department so that all citizens in Madison see them as a community partner. Our communities of color, ethnicity, and immigration harbor a great deal of mistrust in government and law enforcement. Our next police chief must be willing to change that mentality and show that our officers are partners, not the enemy. I dislike the phrase “defunding the police” because it is inaccurate and leads those who don’t understand to assume that it means completely shutting down law enforcement agencies. As a budget analyst, I prefer calling this reallocating resources to grow needed community support services. I would prefer our next police chief understands this need.

I would prefer a police chief who is willing to deal with politics at the city, county, state, and federal levels. We are a grossly-divided nation, not a united one. I fear the same urban flight that I saw growing up in Milwaukee during the late 80’s and early 90’s can happen here. Call it what you will; I recognize it as racism and white flight. Leaders at every level are willing to divide and conquer. Our next police chief will have to navigate these choppy waters.

I would prefer a police chief who is willing to push neighborhoods like mine to opt into more community engagement amongst ourselves through programs like The Good Neighbor Project. To my knowledge, only three or four of Oakbridge’s 145 households has attended any Good Neighbor Project presentation. If our next police chief can get my board to even start discussing it, they’ve made more progress than me.

I would prefer a police chief who is willing to go before local and state officials and push for decriminalizing drug abuse. As someone who is recovering from alcohol use disorder and volunteers as a SMART Recovery meeting facilitator, I’ve met numerous participants who continue to struggle with their own recovery from both drugs and alcohol, yet have good hearts and intentions. They don’t belong in prison; they need help with mental health and substance use disorders. Our next police chief needs to cultivate that understanding.

I would prefer a police chief who is willing to support those officers that continue to provide positive support in the community and also willing to discipline those that have troubled records. I believe that we have many good, well-intentioned police officers in the Madison Police Department. They deserve to be recognized for their work. However, officers that hide behind the shield and abuse their power have no place in any police department. I know that the officers I’ve met so far seem well-intentioned.

I believe that our police department has already established many good practices and does its best to hire based on equity, inclusiveness, and fairness. There is more work to do, though. I don't know what others have come here to say. I do know that criminal activity raises my neighbors' cackles. They're fast to prosecute because much of this is happening to them. Although I want my neighbors to be safe, I also want us to explore creative outlets that will help those engaged in criminal activity turn over a new leaf, outside of incarceration.

Our next police chief will have to be someone who is passionate about changing the way we police, how we engage our community, how we deal with criminal activity, and how we become a model for the rest of the nation. I worry about my own brother-in-law who serves as an officer in another city, and I was thinking about the challenges he faces as I drafted this presentation. As a person who isn't of European descent, I sometimes find myself being looked at differently. I shudder when I hear about weapons drawn on a legal resident in our own neighboring Monona because he wasn't the right skin color; that could be me. Our next police chief needs to build a mindset of inclusivity among our neighbors. You have challenging work ahead of you. Good luck in your search. And thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on behalf of Oakbridge Neighborhood today.