

The Columbus Dispatch

Downtown Columbus protests remain peaceful

By Megan Henry

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A relative peace fell over the Columbus demonstrations calling for police reform in the past two days.

Thousands still protested and demanded changes from police and the city after the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police. But reports of vandalism and complaints of excessive force by officers largely subsided.

As protests continued Wednesday and the tension eased, authorities continued to investigate the vandalism and arson that occurred over the weekend. And there were still calls on police to reform.

On Wednesday, Columbus Fire charged a man with aggravated arson for intentionally setting fire to a nearly finished apartment building near Topiary Park early Sunday.

But fire officials said the fire does not appear to be related to the protests and vandalism that occurred over the weekend.

Derrick D. Lee, 30, whose address is listed as the streets of Columbus, will appear in Franklin County Municipal Court on Thursday.

Fire crews were called to the three-alarm fire about 3 a.m. Sunday at the Residences at Topiary Park, a nearly finished apartment building at 65 S. Washington Ave.

A series of smaller fires, mostly involving dumpsters and construction equipment, broke out in the area during the protests Saturday night. The Columbus fire and explosive investigation unit is investigating all other fires from last week.

Anyone who may have video, photographs or statements that would be helpful in solving these crimes is encouraged to email FireArsonInformation@Columbus.gov.

On Wednesday afternoon, hundreds of protesters gathered Downtown on the sidewalk in front of the Statehouse.

Joshua Williams, 34, led many chants and shouted into a bullhorn, his voice hoarse after days of protesting.

The chants of “I can’t breathe, we can’t breathe,” “Hands up, don’t shoot” and “Say his name, George Floyd” were met with approving honks from some cars driving by. Multiple cars slowed and honked when passing the protest.

Some protesters in the crowd started chanting “We need action from the Mayor.”

Williams said he hopes the protests will “bring peace to our city.”

When protesters weren’t chanting, they stood silent with their fists raised in solidarity. People passed out water bottles, popsicles and sandwiches to the crowd.

The youthful crowd held many signs including “The system isn’t broken, it was built this way,” “We will not be silent” and “No justice, no peace.”

There was no visible Columbus police presence, but a handful of State Highway Patrol troopers stood on the Statehouse steps, watching from a distance.

Ruben Moorer said he came out to protest because he is black.

“We want justice for all the innocent black lives ... that got blood shed from the police,” said Moorer, 31, of the East Side

He said he was shocked to see how many people support the Black Lives Matter movement.

“We hope it accomplishes justice, and we want the police to see us ... the way they see everybody else instead of seeing us and thinking that we are the usual suspects,” he said. “We want to see a change.”

One woman at the protest said Wednesday's event was more subtle than the protest she went to last week.

"We're standing still as opposed to us marching, and I think that's just as effective."

She said she hopes the protests will make a difference.

On Tuesday night, Columbus Police Chief Thomas Quinlan and Mayor Andrew J. Ginther showed up at the protests Downtown to speak with demonstrators.

Police commanders listened to complaints and speeches from people grieved about what they say is racist treatment by police officers.

It was the second night that police had joined the crowd to march and have conversations.

The show of force from officers was noticeably lighter than during the early days of protesting, and officers and demonstrators seemed to cooperate. Even when several hundred protesters marched in the street through the Short North and Clintonville after curfew, police largely just monitored the situation.

Demands continued Wednesday for reform within the police department.

Wednesday afternoon, City Attorney Zach Klein spoke with a sense of urgency as he introduced eight proposals designed to address how police have handled the recent protests and also to implement long-term reforms in police-community relations.

"Words are important, but the time for talk is over," he said. "The time for action is now."

Klein called for an independent, outside review of police actions the last week, and he also said he wants to change departmental policies when it comes to using chemical agents (mace, pepper spray, etc) against peaceful protesters.

Klein also wants a system in which the city attorney's office reviews misdemeanor charges before they are filed and reviews the police handling of traffic offenses. Officers could still arrest suspects, but charges would be

reviewed before they were filed, similar to the way felony charges are handled with the county prosecutor's office.

Klein joined the chorus of officials who want to see a citizen review board set up for the police division. He said his office's labor-relations staff is reviewing the Fraternal Order of Police contract with the city to see if there are opportunities to make changes before the contract expires in December.

Long term, he wants to add training for police recruits in which they spend time in the community and meet community leaders.

"I know the vast majority of police officers have a good heart and want to do the right thing," he said. "It's up to us to issue directives and policies so that they can follow them and do the right thing and be empowered to do the right thing."

Klein was joined by Columbus Urban League president and CEO Stephanie Hightower, Elder Larry Price of the Columbus chapter of the NAACP and the Rev. Frederick LaMarr.

Meanwhile, Franklin County Common Pleas Court Judge Chris Brown has sent a letter to Fraternal Order of Police Capital City Lodge No. 9 informing the union that he will not seek its endorsement.

Brown said that in his 15 years in the legal profession, most of his experiences with law enforcement have been positive.

But, he said: "The reason I am not screening (for an endorsement) is because I do not feel the FOP has done enough to weed out the 'bad apples.'"

Dispatch Reporters Bill Bush, Ken Gordon and Jim Woods contributed to this story.

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