

Protests more peaceful on Sunday as police change tactics

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Protests over the death of George Floyd in Minnesota mostly simmered through Sunday afternoon in Columbus after having boiled over the previous three days, when demonstrators damaged local businesses and police used pepper spray and wooden bullets to control the crowds.

While the crowd on Sunday morning initially was smaller than on Saturday, it grew into the thousands as protesters marched from the Statehouse to Columbus police headquarters and to other parts of Downtown.

But the police presence Downtown never reached the same level — in size or intensity — as on previous days. Officers who were patrolling wore regular uniforms, not the riot gear they had donned Saturday as they used tear gas in addition to pepper spray and wooden bullets to control the crowd.

On Sunday morning, protesters marched from 7th Avenue down High Street to the Statehouse grounds, where they knelt to pray on the west plaza while others chanted “I can’t breathe” and “Say his name. George Floyd.”

The gathering of more than 300 people, some of them shaking hands with troopers guarding the Statehouse steps while others chanted just feet away, was a contrast to the chaos that initially peaceful demonstrations devolved into on Saturday.

The crowd grew far larger in the afternoon, marching to the police headquarters and back to the Statehouse. Instead of using pepper spray and tear gas to control those who were marching in the middle of 3rd Street, police vehicles quietly escorted them on Sunday afternoon.

Tensions between the protesters and police appeared to ease in part because of a change in tactics. Mayor Andrew J. Ginther said he told police Chief Thomas Quinlan that the tactics used on Saturday were not appropriate.

“I was very clear with the chief, I heard loud and clear from the community that (Saturday’s) approach and tactic did not meet our community’s or my expectations around engagement with crowds of overwhelmingly peaceful protesters,” Ginther told The Dispatch.

Asked what changes were made for Sunday, Ginther deferred to Quinlan. The chief declined to comment through a department spokesman.

It was clear on Sunday, though, that the police response was different from the previous three days. Officers in riot gear were held in reserve instead of deployed preemptively to the protests, said Deputy Chief Tim Becker, who oversaw the response on Friday and Sunday.

“We fully support people exercising their First Amendment right to protest and free speech. Our concern is for the safety of our citizens, the safety of our officers, and to prevent crimes from occurring. That has not happened today,” Becker said around 4 p.m.

When one protester decided to lie down in the middle of High Street on Sunday, police did not force him back onto the sidewalk. Instead, fellow protesters dragged him from the street.

One protester defended members of the Ohio National Guard from harassment.

Ginther said that Columbus police intelligence indicated that those who were damaging property and antagonizing police over the weekend were from outside Columbus and included white nationalists and anarchists.

“Here’s the bottom line: Folks who are doing harm to our city, those who want to hurl bottles and bricks at our police officers, those who want to destroy our businesses, we’re going after them,” Ginther said. “The goal is to allow for peaceful protests. The goal of our officers has to be to protect and allow peaceful protesters to be safe. It is not to stifle or suppress.”

On Saturday, as the crowd swelled to about 2,000 people, police used pepper spray and tear gas to control the protest. Videos showed officers firing wooden bullets. Gov. Mike DeWine deployed 300 members of the Ohio National Guard to Columbus and Cleveland, and Columbus instituted a 10 p.m. curfew on Saturday.

Columbus police arrested 59 people on Saturday; charges ranged from disorderly conduct to breaking and entering. Ginther said the curfew will remain in place until he lifts it.

On Saturday, Downtown protesters had dispersed by late afternoon, but tensions rose again as night fell and they spread to the Near East Side, the Short North and Downtown.

A three-alarm blaze at a nearly completed apartment building Downtown burned for hours Sunday morning, causing the roof and several floors to collapse. Firefighters were called to the building at 3:07 a.m., and they said the cause was suspicious.

The four-story Residences at Topiary Park at 65 S. Washington Ave. is along the north side of the park and just east of the Columbus Metropolitan Library's main location.

Fire Battalion Chief Steve Martin said that an earlier attempt was made overnight to set fire to the Grant Oak Apartments under construction next door. That attempt was quickly extinguished.

Construction material and a vehicle were set on fire at Oak Street near 5th Street. Windows were broken on the east side of Downtown. Protesters faced off with officers. Chairs and other material was set on fire inside the ADAMH building on East Broad Street.

Protesters threw rocks through the window at the Egan-Ryan Funeral Home east of Downtown, and windows were broken at the Columbus College of Art and Design.

On Sunday morning, National Guard members were posted near military-style vehicles on 3rd Street in Downtown Columbus, and State Highway Patrol troopers stood guard at the bottom of the west steps of the Statehouse.

Tristan Akers said he was inspired to join the protests on Sunday after seeing television coverage of the previous few days.

"It's important that those white moderates get up off the couch and stand with those being targeted," Akers said.

Sharita Chevltan held a sign with dozens of names of black men killed by police as she marched through the Short North chanting "no justice, no peace."

"It shouldn't take for one of our people to get killed to get this," she said. "I'll be here all day until they kick us out. I'm not going anywhere."

Columbus Urban League Young Professionals, led by President Nick Bankston, called Sunday for a national economic protest — a day when nonessential African American employees forgo going to work.

Columbus Urban League CEO Stephanie Hightower said her organization has a "moral imperative" as Americans to collectively "stand up, speak out and stop bigotry now."

"I implore our major employers and business leaders to lean in and lift up our families, white, black and brown," Hightower said. "This cause and these events echo those that led to the creation of the United States 244 years ago, when one of our founders said, 'We should hang together, or surely hang alone.'"

Dispatch reporters Max Filby, Mark Ferenchik and Bethany Bruner contributed to this story.