

Viola West  
11/21/08

### City Council Votes to Keep Same Residency Proposal

For many Memphians, their first visit to a session of the city council meeting downtown proved to be a disappointment. The Memphis City Council conducted their bimonthly meeting Tuesday November 18<sup>th</sup> to an audience that passionately spoke in favor of reducing the residency restriction for police officers. If each citizen who showed up at the meeting Tuesday entered the Memphis Police Academy, the required number of new police officers would be met. However, the over 300 Memphians who packed the city hall in standing-room only already have jobs, pay taxes, and support their families. The dramatic increase in the metropolitan crime rate to second place nationally has been felt by these citizens. Homes have been broken into and robbed, belongings stolen, and loved ones assaulted.

The audience broke into standing applause as Councilman Reid Hedgepeth announced that he wished to break from traditional proceedings and hear from the members of the audience before the council members debated. Over one hundred Memphians spoke of personal experiences with crime in Memphis in an attempt to sway the undecided Council members to put more police officers on the street. Only ten spoke against the measure.

Mayor A.C. Wharton approached the podium first.

“I am speaking as a long-time citizen, and not as an official; I support this measure but with conditions”; citing Councilwoman Heller’s expressed concerns about unfair testing standards as a situation that needed to be investigated, and suggested a two-month extended effective date for the motion if it passed.

“We in East Memphis have not fled the city...we live here, and we choose to live in the city...with all due respect, we don’t have two months”, replied concerned Memphian Heidi Schaeffer.

Councilman Joe Brown, against the measure, acknowledged that crime is a social problem here in Memphis, but did not believe that the city could afford a few hundred more officers.

“You go out and find the officers; we’ll go out and find the money”, replied Councilman Flinn, a supporter of the vote.

Small business owner Michael Branch shared with the council and attending public that he had to move his business to Mississippi because he was vandalized six times in Memphis. Others, like Branch, are choosing to leave the city because of the crime in favor of a safer environment. Many Memphians who spoke at the council meeting Tuesday night, like Ken Wunderlick, have lived in Memphis their whole lives and do not want to move.

“My wife and I have lived for over sixty years in the city...what we need to do is improve the quality of life by reducing crime”, said Wunderlick.

Tim Daly has lived in the city for twelve years, and also does not want to leave. There have been twelve break-ins on his street in within the last 30 days, including his next-door neighbor, whose house has been vandalized twice. Daly implored the council to join together in their vote, “Each one of you has a common thread- and that is to make the lives of Memphis citizens better...and you can do this by enlarging the pool of candidates (for police officers)”.

Memphian Victor Bagdwell agreed, “My mother had to move out of the city due to the crime...we need to hire some more police officers, whether it is in the city limits or not”.

The rising unemployment rate and weakened economy has contributed to the rise in crime, said Memphian Vicky Gore, “As unemployment rises, there are only going to be more incidents that will affect the lives of the people...we can’t protect the people of Memphis from economic troubles but we can do something about crime right here today.”

Despite a heated debate that lasted past 10 p.m., and palpable public support from citizens, the measure to remove the residency restriction did not pass. Six council members Flinn, Hedgepeth, Strickland, Boyd, Conrad, and Morrison supported removing the residency requirement for police officers to serve the city of Memphis. The other

seven council members, Halbert, Ford, Swearingen-Ware, Fullilove, Lowery, Brown, and Collins were in favor of retaining the existing policy.

Councilman Strickland urged the seven council members who had voted against the motion to reconsider, citing several large cities, such as New York, LA, Atlanta, Baltimore, and Charlotte, which have removed their strict residency requirements and achieved success in the fight against crime.

“If you don’t want officers in your district who live outside Memphis, send them to my district”, pleaded Strickland to the other council members, “you are going to preside over a decaying city”.