

Carrboro Citizen

State NAACP calls for action in Brown case

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William Barber, Jr. at Peace & Justice Plaza Tuesday

By Rich Fowler
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Surrounded by local supporters, Rev. William Barber, president of the NAACP of North Carolina, spoke out Tuesday against the Chapel Hill Police Department's findings in the Charles Brown case during a news conference at the Peace and Justice Plaza in Chapel Hill.

"To even hear in this time in which we live that somebody was stopped, searched and seized, and even after the cops found out they had the wrong person, the allegations are that this person was still taunted. This is wrong, it must be repaired, and it is a stain on this city until it is corrected," Barber said.

According to Brown's account of events, at approximately 11:35 on the night of June 1, he was stopped by Chapel Hill police while he walked on West Rosemary Street near Breadmen's. He subsequently was handcuffed, searched and held for more than 40 minutes in a case of mistaken identity.

According to a tape recording, at 12:14 a Chapel Hill police officer called in and had Brown's name checked in several criminal databases. The police officers contend that Brown was stopped immediately prior to the call. By Brown's account, the call was placed a half hour or so after they knew they had the wrong man. (The police initially believed Brown to be a man named Fearington wanted for outstanding warrants.)

After an internal investigation, the police department exonerated the officers involved of any wrongdoing.

Barber read aloud a letter to the town government from Michelle Laws, president of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro branch of the NAACP, that asks the town for the opportunity to publicly present Brown's side of the events to the Chapel Hill Town Council.

The NAACP also wants a status report on the proposed Civilian Police Review Board. The letter points out that, in the investigation, the police officers involved were interviewed but Brown was not, and calls the idea of police reviewing police a "fallacy."

As part of their request for a status report on the review board, they also are asking for "a five-year review of the officers' stops and arrests including location, cause, and race and gender demographics."

Finally, the NAACP is asking for a report on the number of black business owners in Chapel Hill,

how they have been included in the town's development plans and whether they are members of the chamber of commerce or other organizations that promote the interests of small businesses.

"We want them to immediately respond to the letter today," Barber said, "and to immediately give the president here [of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro branch of the NAACP] and those persons that she designates, along with our legal counsel, an opportunity to come before the council."

Al McSurely, legal redress chair of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro and state NAACP, said that, after two months, "we would want a resounding apology to Mr. Brown, some movement, if not the passage, of a strong resolution for a civilian review board and a thorough independent investigation of what really happened out there, not by the police."

Chapel Hill Mayor Kevin Foy said the police report should not be taken as a judgment by the town council of what happened.

"The determination that the council made is that it was in the best interests of the public and the integrity of the police department to at least have the police department's investigation and conclusion made public, and that's what we did," Foy said.

Foy added that the NAACP's letter would be treated like a petition to the council.

"We're not a court," he said. "We're not hearing evidence. We need to know from citizens, whoever the citizens are, what it is that their expectation is, and how can the council deal with that."

Foy said the council needs to determine "what is it that the council can do, what is it that's being requested, and go through this in a normal kind of way, and figure out what the endpoint is going to be."

"We intend to take this issue very seriously," Barber said. "We stand with this branch.

"... [T]his case has the potential to be a national case, because it's happening across the nation. But it is so clear in Chapel Hill, and it is time for us to get our house in order."