

Fayette Drumsticks from the County Commission

Fayette News - January 18, 2018 - Opinion



Christopher Fairchild is the editor of Panacea magazine and Welcome to Fayette magazine, and works as a photographer and graphic designer for Fayette Newspapers.

In the years preceding his time as Georgia's 75th governor, the segregationist Lester Maddox was the proprietor of the Pickrick Restaurant in Atlanta, and it was a well-known fact that black patrons were not welcome in his establishment. After the Civil Rights Act was passed, Maddox made it clear that he would not change his ways and would not serve the African-American community. One day, three black Georgia Tech students decided to eat at the Pickrick. Maddox, along with about 10 other patrons and employees of the eatery, grabbed axe handles ("pickrick drumsticks" in their mock-cute parlance) and confronted the three youths who were about to make their way inside. He claimed that his reasons weren't of the racist sort, but rather an issue of "private property rights." The incident, while not doing much harm to Maddox's reputation across the state, cast Georgia in an unfavorable light, tarnishing the view of the state in many sectors of the country and abroad; all this at a time when attitudes towards the treatment of black people were making great strides nationwide.

It reminded me, in a metaphorical way, of what happened last Thursday night at the Fayette County Commission meeting. In a 4 to 1 decision, the County Commission voted to endorse Georgia Senate Bill 233, the so-called "Religious Freedom" bill (RFRA), which supporters claim protects the rights of religious people, and detractors claim would open the door to allowing discrimination against certain groups of people, most likely members of the LGBT demographic. It's a controversial issue, and a similar bill was vetoed last year by Republican Governor Nathan Deal, who sees its potential implementation in Georgia as disastrous for business and industry in the state. Even the Georgia Chamber of Commerce, a pretty conservative entity by any measure, came out against it. In fact, both Disney and Marvel threatened to cease film production in Georgia had the measure passed, which would have had dire consequences for Fayette County, considering our newest and shiniest fledgling industry. Other industries that have professed reluctance to center business operations in states with such a law in place include Dell Computers, Apple, Time Warner, Comcast, Sony Pictures, Lions Gate, and Starz. Even the NCAA and the NFL have expressed doubts about holding tournaments and bowls in such states. When Indiana passed a similar law, Salesforce, Yelp and others pulled out, costing the state tens of millions in lost revenue, and jobs. North Carolina lost the NCAA tournament in response to the passage of HB2.

Enter Georgia State Senator Marty Harbin. A co-sponsor of SB233, he put in an appearance at Thursday's commission meeting. Impressive in his cowboy-boots-and-suit ensemble, Harbin was introduced by the commissioners to make some remarks to the crowd and to present a video advocating RFRA. Strangely, he chose not to address the commissioners directly, but instead turned to face the gathered congregants and deliver a parable-laden speech as if we were all under a big tent on a hot Georgia night. The video presentation blindsided at least one Commissioner, Charles Rousseau, who remarked that had he known the video was being presented, the opposition could have prepared something of their own to show.

There were quite a few citizen speakers, both for and against the measure, with many of the antis wondering why there was a need for this bill, and most of those supporting the bill evincing a deep-seated fear of having to participate in a gay wedding.

What it ultimately comes down to is the message that Fayette County and the State of Georgia want to send to the rest of the world. Governor Deal put it nicely when he said that RFRA would violate Georgia's image as a state full of "warm, friendly, and loving people." He says he will not hesitate to wield his veto pen again, but Deal will not be governor for very much longer, and so no one knows how his successor will view the matter. Whatever the intentions of those who support the bill are, whether or not they have real, legitimate concerns for religious freedom or whether the bill is just sheep's clothing for a license to discriminate, the message it sends will be one of a hostile, unwelcoming place for any person who happens to be a little different.

At one point during Thursday's proceedings, Commissioner Rousseau asked whether this issue was even in the purview of the County Commission. Why was this body spending the time to debate and vote on such a matter, when all of the regular county business had not even been dealt with? Why was the Commission issuing religious statements rather than dealing with the real problems of the county? Rousseau asked: "Is this a litmus test to see how religious we are?"

The vote was taken soon after, and it passed. The commissioners, in essence, voted to buy the county some, what we might call, Fayette Drumsticks.

In a note of seeming gracelessness, considering how many of their constituents in attendance were at that moment stinging from the outcome, Commissioners Steve Brown, Eric Maxwell, and Randy Ognio all grinned widely from the dais following their victory. Commissioner Charles Oddo, to his credit, was solemn-faced, but that is perhaps just his default setting.

As I left the room that night, a funny, yet painful (I'm sure there's a German word for that), image popped into my mind: Commissioner Ognio, Commissioner Brown, Commissioner Oddo, and Chairman Maxwell, all seated in their elevated chairs, in unison pull out their hand mirrors and gaze at their images as each straightens his halo. Meanwhile Commissioner Rousseau tries in vain to organize the huge stacks of unfinished, unattended papers surrounding them.

And finally History herself, that eternal Cassandra, puts her lips together tightly....and sighs in regret for the lessons we haven't yet learned.



Commissioners Steve Brown, Eric Maxwell, and Randy Ognio converse after the vote to support the religious freedom bills.