

# Opinion: Peachtree City Pitchforks

Fayette News - April 23, 2019 - Opinion / Top Stories

The citizens of Peachtree City demonstrated last Thursday night that they will indeed bite if provoked.



In what can be politely termed a "misguided" adventure, the mayor and city council were poised to vote on a measure that basically stated that the city would pick up the legal bills if a member of the city government was "subjected to unwarranted defamation," including remarks made on social media such as Facebook or Twitter, and then decided to sue the individual who made the remarks.

In other words, the citizen who said something the city considered to be defaming could be taken to court at taxpayer expense.

The good people of Peachtree City were justified in raising a collective eyebrow at this.

The crowd at the council meeting was overflowing, with all the seats taken and throngs of people standing along the walls and out into the hall.

At the conclusion of the other regular business, the agenda item in question came up for discussion. Mayor Fleisch tried to explain the motivations behind the measure as a means by which a city employee might protect their reputation in case they happened to be falsely accused of a crime. She used an awkward example of a "fire-man" who might be suspected of stealing a diamond necklace (only in Peachtree City, right?) and then that person's California (?) relative saying mean things about the "fire-man" on the Facebook.

Needs its own law, right?

Not so fast. The people want to make a few remarks here.

With TV crews in position, a multitude of hands shot into the air when it was asked if anyone wanted to comment on the matter. A giant stopwatch was thrown onto the screen above the mayor's head and the countdown began. Each citizen would have no more than two minutes to make their opinions known.

A well-dressed man was introduced as being from the ACLU and the knee-jerk reaction of the assembled crowd was to moan and groan. But when he made it clear that such a measure would only serve to inhibit citizens from speaking up about issues and would have detrimental financial effects on the city coffers due to a proliferation "anti-slap" and "slap-back" lawsuits, the crowd did a 180 and began cheering him wildly.

It may have been at this point that the mayor leaned over and droned softly into her microphone. "I'm sorry, we don't allow the clapping." It was the only time she offered such a futile reminder.

The line at the microphone yielded spanking comment after spanking comment from the citizenry as the city lawyer, the city manager, the mayor, and the council members all sat at the dais like a row of golden retrievers being shame-filmed for stewing trash across the kitchen floor.

The remarks crested and troughed, back and forth from thoughtful, measured words to those that bordered, at times, on unhinged. One wondered if pitchforks might be brandished at some point.

"Suck it up and listen!"

"Orwellian-style power-grab."

"Abandon this idea and don't EVER reconsider it again!"

"You fools!"

"You should be utterly embarrassed!"

"Intimidation!"

"Fascism!"

"Really? You care about what someone says about you on Facebook?"

"Did we elect a bunch of snowflakes?"

"It did not go well for King George and it will not go well for you!"

"Most ill-conceived idea to ever come through a city council."

"Pouting and whining like petulant children."

"I'm totally embarrassed."

"A talk show host called you idiots today!"

"Boneheaded idea."

"Next time there's an election -- Don't run!"

At one point, an angry woman's time limit was called by the clerk and she barked back "Oh, hush up!! I'm not done!!"

Civil society was breaking down.

Not that the council didn't deserve to feel the wrath of the near-mob.

Former mayor Steve Brown stood to speak and gestured to the looming stopwatch projection. He boomed, "This clock is demeaning!!" The crowd erupted. He decreed that out of a population of 38,000 people, the public's right to comment was being severely limited by the council's time constraint of just 50 minutes.

There were tears or outright crying a number of times from emotionally-charged speakers.

Near the end, a more-composed student from McIntosh High School took the mic and asked the panel whose idea the motion was in the first place. Complete silence as they stared at the young man. Cries of "Coward!" could be heard from the audience. Finally, the student proceeded to ask each member from left to right on the dais if the idea was theirs.

The city lawyer sat silent with his hands clasped in front of his face for a long moment, obviously turning over in his mind whether or not he should break ranks, before he softly uttered, "No." The city manager said no. Councilman King said no. Mayor Fleisch was the next victim of the teenage Torquemada. "Was it your idea?" No discernable words were audible as she shifted uncomfortably in her seat. And she then giggled.

Draw your own conclusions.

When a shy 12-year-old girl rose to speak, city manager Rorie got up from his seat and left the room, presumably for a restroom break. He didn't explain. But his disregard for the little girl's comment seemed to so shake her, that she sat back down, too embarrassed to finish. Perhaps Rorie could have waited, perhaps not. But the appearance was one of insensitivity, to say the least.

With the public comments concluded, the council members spoke next. King called it "a circus." Council member Ernst was visibly shaken by the evenings proceedings and held back tears (mostly). He was concerned about his integrity being challenged, which it definitely had been for the previous 50 minutes.

Council member Madden gave an eloquent statement about why he was opposed to the measure, and Council Member Prebor wanted to remind everyone that these were volunteer positions that they were all filling on the council. (That is, of course, if you don't count the \$12,000 per year a council member receives.)

Anyway, the motion failed.

It became apparent throughout the night, slowly dawning on the city council, that while Peachtree City could have hired some very skilled lawyers to sue its own citizens, the citizens had an ace in their pocket. A pretty good lawyer of their own. His name is James Madison. You might know his work. It's called the First Amendment.

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