

STATEMENT OF FORMER MAYOR ALEX KNOPP TO COMMON COUNCIL ON  
MARCH 22, 2007

Opposing racial discrimination, strengthening human rights and continuing the march forward toward social justice should be the highest priorities for every city agency and department, every educational, social, professional, religious, labor and recreational group, and every non-profit organization in Norwalk.

As Mayor, I worked to attack and diminish racial prejudice and other forms of discrimination in Norwalk and initiated many changes in policies and personnel to make our city agencies more effective in combating racism and every other form of human rights discrimination.

Tonight I will focus just on the significant concrete steps my administration initiated to promote racial diversity in the Norwalk Fire Department. I am very proud of these efforts.

First, the Fire Commission at my request voted to drop the previously existing requirement that any applicant for the Fire Department had to hold a Firefighter I Certification—proof that the basic level of basic firefighter training had been completed. This was a significant and substantial change in policy designed to reduce discriminatory barriers and to open the recruiting process to more minority applicants. The only customary ways to obtain Firefighter I certification were either to be trained in a volunteer fire department located primarily in suburbs that had fewer minority residents; or an applicant could graduate from a course at a community college, after attending night classes following his or her after regular work and paying tuition. I didn't feel this was fair.

This policy change had the impact of expanding the pool of minority applicants because now any citizen would be eligible to apply without having to meet this prequalification. It may have exposed the city to higher costs to pay for the new employee's training at the State Fire Academy, but I felt it was worth putting city funds to back up this new commitment to strengthen diversity.

Second, we voted to extend the Norwalk resident preference score on firefighter entrance exams to improve opportunities for local residents, as had been done previously. Our purpose was to improve opportunities for minority candidates because the minority population in Norwalk is larger than the statewide minority population. This policy also had other benefits in terms of successful applicants knowing our community.

Generally, we also successfully removed any lingering substance and also the appearance of cronyism, favoritism and partisanship from the hiring and promotion processes. When I became Mayor, there was a lawsuit pending against the city alleging personal and political favoritism in the previous hiring procedures and a labor grievance due to alleged favoritism in the promotion to a management position for a member of the Republican Town Committee. As a result, there were no legal or other challenges to the validity of

the test results or to the hiring list that resulted from my administration's two hiring tests. I commend Deputy Chief Steve Shay for managing these processes so competently.

Third, we formed a partnership with the African-American and Latino faith-based communities prior to both entry exams to help us distribute firefighter applications and locate new applicants. We joined with the clergy to sponsor a dinner at City Hall to encourage interested residents who attended their churches to learn more about the hiring process. I attended this dinner and spoke.

Fourth, I appointed Sanford Anderson as the first African-American Fire Chief in the city's history following the retirement of Chief Verda. As the photographs of the occasion clearly show, the day I swore in Sandy as Norwalk's new Chief in this chamber was the happiest moment of my service as Mayor and from his smile it looked to be Sandy's as well.

That decision was the right one. Sandy earned it. It gave me and the city the opportunity to honor Sandy for his great service to Norwalk. This appointment enabled Sandy to fulfill his desire to go out on top. And it broadcast the loudest possible message to the entire community that in 2004-- during the 50<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme court decision holding that the old segregationist doctrine of "separate but equal" was unconstitutional— the Norwalk Fire Department and the entire city were actively and successfully striving to fulfill the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. that a dedicated firefighter without regard to the color of his skin could become chief in Norwalk based on the content of his character.

Fifth, we hired The Matrix Consulting Group to undertake a thorough analysis of the operations, training needs, staffing, equipment, deployments and other aspects of the fire service to give us a 10 to 20 year "master plan" blueprint to guide city decisions on capital investment, vehicle replacement, fire station expansion, the anticipated transfer of First Responder duties to the Fire Department, personnel organization and other aspects affecting the modernization of the fire service. Fire union representatives and rank-and-file firefighters were regularly consulted and involved during the study period. That report was completed in December, 2004. I urge you to read the entire report as part of your investigation.

One of the findings relevant to the discussion tonight about preventing discrimination was the recommendation to upgrade the training. The report recommended as a "high priority" that "(t)he Fire Department needs to make several major changes in its training program. These include improving the continuity in the position of Training Officer, development of a standards-based training program...development of new hire training, and provision of management training [p. 119]."

In particular, it recommended that training be strengthened by the creation of a Training Chief position comparable to the Fire Marshall's office to replace the current system under which the management of training is done by the least senior Deputy Chief who is

always anxious to transfer up to be a line Deputy Chief. The purpose of the change is to improve leadership and continuity in the training function.

Sixth, we conducted a thorough search and hired an excellent chief in Denis McCarthy to begin his tenure in April, 2005. One of the principal reasons why the Fire Commission favored Chief McCarthy over the other candidates was his strong commitment to strengthening minority recruitment-- and to recruiting Norwalk's first female firefighter, as had been the case in the Westport Fire Department.

Finally, although it impacts all city agencies and not just the Fire Department, I encouraged the Human Relations Commission to place a stronger focus on preventive education and anti-discrimination awareness as its core mission. The Rev. Dr. Lindsay Curtis, the head of the Norwalk NAACP, led a task force to review the operations of the commission. The then newly-appointed Executive Director, Elizabeth Youngerman, was very committed to the mission of preventive education against discrimination. She had started educational sessions for city employees before she left and I hope that this vacant position can be filled quickly so that this important work can resume.

All of these changes were occurring in the midst of other significant post 9/11 changes in Norwalk's public safety and fire services, including the creation of the Public Safety Commission, the creation of the new position of Emergency Management Planner and Combined Dispatch Director, the implementation of a combined emergency dispatch system, the construction of a new emergency operations center in the new Norwalk Police Department HQ, the impact of expanded First Responder duties and the contract negotiation difficulties.

To sum up, during my four years as Mayor we made many important strides forward to enhance racial diversity in the fire service, to implement modern long-range planning, to adopt "best practices" training in the Fire Department that was to include such issues as "cultural diversity," "ethics," "group dynamics," and the "human resource policies" of the city; and to improve public safety in the post-9/11 world for Norwalk.

Let me now turn to some of the questions raised in the Scot Wilson case.

During the first 45 of the 48 months I served as Mayor, Mr. Wilson's case had been presented to the Fire Commission in two ways. First, there was his claim of "age discrimination" filed with the CHRO on April 4, 2003 that involved disputes he had with other fire service personnel going back to November, 2002. The Fire Department and the City investigated this claim, replied to his claim through the able work of Attorney Jeff Spahr, and the CHRO dismissed the complaint on both August 4, 2003 and, following a successful reconsideration request from Mr. Wilson, dismissed it again on July 13, 2006, finding "no reasonable cause" to believe that any illegal discrimination had occurred.

There was never an allegation of race discrimination as part of this claim, even though the CHRO form allows for multiple allegations.

Second, the Fire Commission was constantly involved in the problem of Mr. Wilson's alcoholism. Mr. Wilson was assigned to drive fire department vehicles. His alcoholism involved documented incidents of his arriving at work after drinking on January 21, 2005, followed by a verbal warning; April 3, 2005, followed by suspension from work; May 11, 2005, followed by suspension from work; July 8, 2005, followed by out-patient alcohol treatment. [On June 30, 2005, he was involved in a motor vehicle accident while on a first responder call.]

[After I left office, he reported for duty again under the influence of alcohol on September 21, 2006, and was sent home.]

As you can imagine, on the Fire Commission we were always very concerned about the impact of alcohol on performance because an impaired firefighter presented a threat to the safety of his fellow firefighters and to the public, especially when the driving of high-speed vehicles was involved. And we tried to be fair to the employee, giving repeated opportunities for treatment and rehabilitation. Part of the difficulty is that denial is part and parcel of the illness of alcoholism, and this was certainly true in this case. As an aside, the city should be very appreciative of the excellent work of firefighter Jack O'Donnell in his role as the Employee Assistance Program liaison for the union.

That is the background of how Mr. Wilson's position had been brought to the Fire commission's attention during the first 45 or 46 months of my service at City Hall.

On September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2005, Mr. Wilson sent a three-page letter addressed to Chief McCarthy that included 10-pages of attachments. The transcript is first mentioned on page 2 and the transcript is attached as pages 9 and 10 of the attachments.

My office was one of 7 recipients copied on the letter. I never read the letter and have no recollection of looking at it. In light of the volume of mail received in my office, I rarely, if ever, spent time reading letters that were addressed and written to other city department heads and would have relied on the recipient to let me know if it contained noteworthy material. This was especially true in matters involving the Fire and Police Departments, where I always tried to respect the chain of command beginning with the Chief. In this matter, the letter was addressed to the Fire Chief and involved an on-going personnel matter in the Fire Department.

I want to make very clear that at no time was any videotape ever offered to me, made known to me, presented to me or played for me. I had no knowledge that a videotape ever existed until its alleged contents were reported in the media. As far as I know, Mr. Wilson never asked directly to meet with me or to explain to me directly and personally his experience with discrimination.

There is nothing unusual about my not plowing through every copied letter and pages of attachments that were received by my office or relying on the department head to whom it is addressed to alert me to noteworthy content. No amount of 20/20 hindsight makes this office procedure seem unreasonable.

The racist words in the transcript are reprehensible and disgusting and that is why the failure to communicate or otherwise act by those who had knowledge or possession of the videotape or who had actually read his letter and attachments is so disturbing.

The key error in this case after Mr. Wilson sent his letter and videotape to Chief McCarthy was the failure of Chief McCarthy to review the videotape and transcript, and to follow-up by alerting the members of the Fire Commission, including me, about its contents. Chief McCarthy has admitted that his decision not to review the videotape was “a grave error in my judgment. I should have reviewed the tape and acted to address the problems that it revealed... The responsibility was mine and I failed to act. I apologize for that and I am truly sorry.”

This failure to act meant that there was no appropriate response by the city and the Fire Department to these awful insults. Obviously, if I had learned about the videotape’s contents from the Chief, I would have worked with the Fire Commission to investigate the discrimination and to devise responses that match our community’s disgust and determination to prevent this form of racism from happening in the future.

Mr. Wilson’s complaint with the CHRO alleging race discrimination against the city was not filed until June 2006, after I was no longer in office.

The apology by Chief McCarthy and the information in the Success by Design report provide a logical basis for moving forward. I support all 6 of the recommendations in the January, 2007 report by the Success by Design consultants, entitled “Norwalk Fire Department Diversity and Cultural Assessment,” and find it interesting that several of the recommendations run parallel to those in the Matrix Report. Mayor Moccia, Chief McCarthy and the others involved made the right decision to obtain the Success by Design report.

In conclusion, my administration accomplished many changes to strengthen the city’s efforts to improve racial diversity and prevent discrimination in the Norwalk Fire Department and I hope that these can be expanded in the future by implementing the recommendations of The Matrix Report, the Success by Design Report and working with the Human Relations Commission.

Thank you.