

Protestors Defy Curfew as Raleigh Values Property Over Life

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After a night of heavy-handed riot police response to pockets of youthful protestors in its gentrified downtown, Raleigh mayor Mary-Ann Baldwin announced an absolute curfew on Monday, June 1, 2020, starting at 8:00 pm. Under the curfew, no one is permitted to leave their home or be on the streets for any reason other than a medical emergency throughout the city limits, which stretch over a 150 mile area.

The curfew stands in stark contrast to the more measured response to Covid-19 by the city, which is experiencing a marked spike in infection and deaths after the state of North Carolina's "Phase 2" reopening last week and acquiescence to the small ReOpenNC movement. ReOpenNC, composed of no more than a handful of people, decried the economic impact on business owners due to the state's shutdown of non-essential services because of the virus, citing the Constitution and the Second Amendment.

Neither Baldwin nor Governor Roy Cooper, both Democrats, emerged to meet protestors on Sunday night, even though much of the protest was situated directly in front of the governor's mansion. But Baldwin spoke directly to news outlets during the protest, saying she was "heart-broken" over smashed storefront windows and damage to businesses in the city's downtown as she vowed to instill a curfew the following morning.

Image on the right: Mary-Ann Baldwin (Source: Twitter)



Raleigh, the State of North Carolina's capital, has recently seen unprecedented development in its downtown. An area that only a few years ago was composed of government buildings, underused low-rise offices and former warehouses is now packed with gleaming glass towers housing the headquarters of businesses like computer company Redhat, as well as luxury condominiums with upscale shops and restaurants to serve residents on their ground floors. Several construction workers [lost their lives](#) in 2015 at the start of the building boom when the mast climber they were on peeled off of the slick glass sides of 12-story Charter Square.

Though downtown Raleigh was all but deserted at night before the boom, it is the ancestral home of historic African American neighborhoods, Shaw University, the nation's first HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), founded in 1865, and Saint Augustine's University, on whose grounds stood the former Saint Agnes Hospital, in whose maternity ward African American babies were born until 1960. Local artist Pinkie Strother created a four-story [diorama](#) to commemorate Saint Agnes that she donated to the university.

Hargett Street's new bars and restaurants replaced "Black Main Street" where African American professionals like doctors and lawyers had their offices. Many of the small wooden "shotgun" style houses immediately to the east of downtown have been razed, creating a gap between predominantly African American Southeast Raleigh and downtown.

After peaceful protests in front of the Governor's Mansion and the State Courthouse all day Sunday, small groups of protestors squirmed with phalanxes of armoured riot police launching tear gas canisters throughout the night. Many of the new glass storefronts lining downtown Raleigh were smashed and small fires were set in several public trash cans.

But one young woman today explained that she came out to the streets Monday for her young child's sake and his future in a country where he will be judged by his ethnicity. Saying how she will soon have to teach him how to behave in the event of a police interaction, such as "keep your hands on the dashboard, do not make any sudden movements," she went on to address the police directly: "My son is not your enemy. I teach my son to be respectful.... Despite everything good about my child, he's a black man and that's all they see."

House Speaker Tim Moore complained that the police response to Sunday night's unrest was too subdued. "There needs to be a very clear message that lawlessness will not be permitted," and that Governor Cooper needs to do "a better job."

But Saige Martin of the Raleigh City Council called for an investigation into police actions during Sunday night's protests. He recalled how ReOpenNC, a small group objecting to Covid-19 restrictions on movement and business operations, was able to parade around downtown Raleigh carrying machine guns and rocket launchers without police involvement. The governor quickly met with ReOpenNC leader Adam Smith and consequently relaxed the coronavirus restrictions throughout the state.

"We can clean up and repair broken windows, restore lost inventory, but we can never restore the lives taken from us by police violence," he said.

Martin told reports "right-wing groups were likely present in Raleigh last night" with the intent to "discredit the labor of black organizations and the Black Lives Matter movement." Speaking by phone to television station WRAL, the Reverend William Barber III concurred, saying,

"A lot of the so-called violence is not the majority, and much of it is infiltration, people trying to discredit the movement."

But when veteran anchorman David Crabtree asked Barber to disavow the violence, Barber was forthright in his response.

"Segregationists said that Dr Martin Luther King was not being peaceful. People said Moral Monday [the movement Barber now leads] was not peaceful. I was arrested and charged with a crime when I said North Carolinians should be provided with healthcare. Coretta Scott King said that denying healthcare is a form of violence. We don't take on the violence, we challenge it."

As Crabtree cut in, Barber concluded,

“When you see the police who is supposed to be a protector of the state and has a badge on with our name on it, it becomes a tipping point. Yes, it’s about George Floyd, but it goes much, much deeper.”

Minutes before the curfew is set to begin, hundreds of protestors have been packed together on the small grassy square around the old State Capitol building at the head of Fayetteville Street. Unable to practice social distancing, many are trying to keep their faces covered with various types of masks to protect themselves from Covid-19. Cars passing along East Morgan Street are honking their support as they continuously circle around the square, waving and calling out from their rolled down windows to compatriots who will soon be subject to arrest. On the other side of the square, about a hundred protestors have sat down silently in the street in front of the governor’s mansion, bracing for what is to come.

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Featured image: George Floyd Mattered graffiti along 38th St in Minneapolis on Wednesday, after the death of George Floyd on Monday night in Minneapolis, Minnesota (Source: Flickr)

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