



Involved Chapters Create Change Things Happen with Active PBA Chapters

By Tom Slyman

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left to right: NM PBA Member Jim Abraham, NM PBA President Tom Slyman, Huntersville Commissioner Charles Jeter, and NM PBA Member John Hicks.

In the fall of 2007, the North Mecklenburg Chapter screened candidates for the area municipal elections. This was our first screening and the NCPBA and the SSPBA assisted us with the process. The North Mecklenburg Chapter screened municipal candidates from surrounding areas and made our endorsements. One of the leading issues discussed in the screening interviews was a need to support a due process system that would provide a form of accountability and transparency. Fortunately, three of the candidates that we endorsed were elected and sympathetic to this issue. The following is an explanation of what we did next and how our chapter was able to get directly involved with the issue at hand.

After the elections, we maintained contact with the municipal candidates we endorsed. The chapter created a draft of a desired change to the Town of Huntersville personnel policy and presented it to the town's administration by starting with the town's police chief. The suggestion of revising the town's policy was not considered a priority by the administration and really did not receive much attention. The chapter presented the idea, but it seemed to lack a back-and-forth discussion from the administration on what could be changed for them to support the idea. However,

we did continuously keep the administration informed of our desire to see this policy examined further and held follow up meetings with elected officials. A summary of these meetings was provided as a courtesy to the administration to keep them informed of the process as it moved along. The chapter's leadership diligently worked to keep everyone informed with meetings, letters, emails, and phone calls on our time off so there were no surprises.

As the process moved along, the chapter did extensive research on the issue and decided to suggest a third party review with advisory capacity for police discipline cases resulting in termination. An advisory capacity was determined to be the most likely goal that would be accepted by the administration and still provide a benefit to members. The chapter leadership felt it would be more palatable to the administration because they would still have full decision making power regarding terminations, but an advisory capacity would also provide a form of oversight that the chapter members felt would be helpful and would endure as administrations change over the years. Essentially, the process the chapter suggested would provide more information to the town manager before making a final decision regarding termination of a sworn employee. Presenting this suggestion created many challenges because the administration had already demonstrated little interest in the idea and the chapter did

not want to appear insulting toward the administration by suggesting an oversight policy. The chapter leadership recognizes there is a lot to like about the department's current police chief, Chief Potter, because he has advanced the department since he was appointed. The chapter coordinated a public presentation of the issue at a town meeting which opened the door to more public discussion. The chapter also gained the support of several citizens because they too saw the value in the suggestion as tax payers and residents and they spoke openly about these concerns. Many citizens in attendance at this meeting were surprised that such a system did not already exist and the support increased when more citizens heard other citizens talk about it. Several timely high profile incidents around the state regarding police executives also helped demonstrate how members felt a form of oversight was needed.

In the late fall of 2008, we were surprised when town officials consulted a labor attorney in a closed session and did not include the chapter leadership in the process. The chapter leadership was concerned because these issues seemed to have developed when support for the idea was growing, and consulting a labor attorney could have been addressed much earlier in the process. While the chapter leadership was presenting the suggestion to the administration and elected officials, it appeared the administration



left to right: NM PBA President Tom Slyman, Huntersville Commissioner Ken Lucas, NM PBA Senior Vice President Tom Lesser, and NM PBA Member Aaron Fulton.



was presenting why the idea should not be considered rather than how it could be implemented. There were other obstacles presented before this, such as claiming employees did not understand the existing policy when elected officials seemed interested in the idea, but they had been overcome. Fortunately, our continued contact with elected officials provided some insight into concerns the labor attorney raised. Through these fostered relationships with elected officials, the chapter did have an opportunity to provide a document and presentation that essentially encouraged closer examination of the vague concerns presented by a labor attorney. The chapter provided proof that this was not a form of collective bargaining by showing that other jurisdictions in NC have systems for discipline without collective bargaining, among other things.

The chapter has stayed focused on the issue and maintained the high road by keeping everyone informed and answering questions openly with facts. The crux of the issue is that police officers are professionally certified and because these certifications are so fragile there should be a professional system for oversight of discipline when their certifications could be jeopardized. Additionally, because police officers are employees of a municipality paid for with tax payer dollars, there should be a form of oversight to ensure this investment in personnel is protected when it can because a turnover in personnel can hamper efficient service delivery to citizens.

Further public discussion on the issue in December of 2008 led elected officials to instruct the chapter leadership and the town's administration to work together to create a proposal that could be presented in 2009. This is a giant progressive step because this request by elected officials to ask the town administration to officially meet with the chapter leadership on this issue to create a new policy is recognition of the NMPBA Chapter and the concerns of its members.

The chapter has seen very positive responses from the administration in recent years regarding other suggestions presented to improve working conditions, and we are hopeful that working together we can create a policy for discipline with some form of oversight that we can all be proud of in 2009.