Mayor Cheryl Selby’s statement from the June 5, 2020 press conference on protests and demonstrations in Olympia

Good Morning,

I would first like to acknowledge the indigenous people on whose land Olympia resides, the people of Steh Chass of the Squaxin Island Tribe. While this land was ceded through the Medicine Creek Treaty, we know the outcome was not what was expected by the people who have lived here since time immemorial. I honor the Squaxin Island Tribe as the traditional custodians of this land and the water, and pay respect to their elders, past and present. It is our obligation to maintain right relationship with the Tribe by protecting this place alongside them.

Next, why we’re here. Although we might not have known George Floyd personally, he will forever be part of our nation’s history of police violence against black people in America. Every day since his murder, our country has shaken. Convulsing between fear, rage, and nausea. We should feel sick. Those of us who hold the most microphones in our communities, should feel nauseous.

I won’t belabor you with polite talking points or media messaging on white privilege. And I want to acknowledge that Olympia is not without sin in this matter. We are a predominately white community next to communities that are far more diverse. That tells us that we have not been as welcoming and nurturing to communities of color as we’d like to think. The light switched on in America by Mr. Floyd’s murder shines glaringly on Olympia as well.
Let me be clear. The City of Olympia supports the peaceful protests that highlight the racial injustices black people continue to endure at the hands of police in the United States. Last Tuesday, we asked for our community’s help to make sure the messages expressed through protest in Olympia were not drowned out by the violent behavior of those who would use this important moment for something else. What followed were three days of demonstrations that were nonviolent, loving, honoring of Mr. Floyd, and in keeping with the request for peace made by his family at his memorial yesterday. Thank you, Olympia, for answering that call. Thank you for showing who we as Olympians can be.

Now we need to call on our community again. We have information about additional protests planned for tonight. We’re hearing that the organizers of this protest are calling on people from outside Olympia to come to our city for one purpose: To incite Violence, destruction and wreak as much havoc on our community as they can.

Olympia is our home and when your home is the Capital City, visitors frequently come to protest and redress their government. We welcome those voices, that’s what our country was built on, it’s what democracy means and we have worked hard to create safe space for that expression. So, our message to those from outside our community that want to exploit the legitimate protests this week and replace it with their own agenda, please stay home. And I’m asking our community to shun the violent interlopers and instead show them your unity, purpose and peace.

If you are listening to this message and active in the work of social justice, please use your connections and your networks to send a message to those who might be coming tonight. Tell them that they are welcome to peacefully protest. We in Olympia will create safe space for that. Tell them to bring their signs and their songs and their masks (pandemic happening). Tell them to bring their outrage. But use it to build, not to break. Thank you for your help. Thank you for taking care of our city and our community.

We have much work to do in the country and this city to remedy systemic injustice and oppression and I want to speak briefly to the work ahead of us. But to do that fairly, I need to acknowledge that the city began addressing the plague of systemic racism in law enforcement after the shooting of two young black men named Andre and Bryson in 2015. Since that time, the OPD has undergone reforms that include extensive training in racial bias and de-escalation. This community voted to tax themselves to shift the focus in the department to restorative justice and diversion courts. We have a fully outfitted crisis response unit, so that our officers are not responsible to serve as social workers in the mental health crisis. We have peer navigators that work with vulnerable street community members in an attempt to reduce causes for police calls in our downtown, so they’re greeted by a familiar face instead of a uniform.

But progress moves at the speed of trust. And right now it’s painfully obvious that people of color in Olympia don’t trust our police. The work ahead for this city council, administration and public safety officers is clear. We must dig deeper and work harder. But we can’t do that in a vacuum, we can’t make meaningful progress without centering the voices of our black and brown communities. We need POC to not just be at the table, we need you at the head of the table.

My call to action is an invitation. I’m asking for people from historically marginalized communities to come forward and join me at the table with your city council to discuss and design new policies that will hold your voices up and keep you safe.
It’s said that indigenous people, whose stolen land we are currently standing on, think 7 generations ahead. As we rebuild out of these layers of crisis, as we redesign systems that are broken, that is the perspective we will use. When I was on my knee last Monday, in the crowd I found my arms around a few children, and I made a promise to them that I won’t let them down. I can make that promise because of the people standing up here with me. This council takes this issue seriously and will work diligently to address systemic racism, take deliberate action, and make a more just city for generations to come.

Thank you.