

Antioch's first black mayor, Wade Harper, looks to lead city after years of racial unrest

By Paul Bugarino Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times
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ANTIOCH -- A city that has endured its share of racial tension in recent years reached a political milestone this week: the swearing-in of the first black mayor in Antioch's 162-year history.

The significance of Wade Harper's elevation to the city's top elected post is also reflected in his position as a career police officer who ran on a "zero tolerance for crime" platform.

Public safety has emerged as the top political issue in Antioch as crime has grown more worrisome in recent years. It has also played a role in some of the friction involving minority groups, including allegations by civil rights organizations of racial profiling and police misconduct. The city's police chief has recently reached out to minority populations in an effort to build trust and make the police force more diverse.

That diversity has already come to Antioch's City Council, where two of the city's four elected leaders are black. Monica Wilson also took the oath of office Tuesday as Antioch's first black councilwoman.

The council will appoint someone to serve the remaining two years of the council seat Harper won in 2010.

It's a big change in the city of 104,000 that before 2006 had never elected a black council member, and it reflects Antioch's changing demographics, with the black population growing from 2 to 17 percent in the past two decades.

"It's a statement. It tells me the city is moving forward," said Willie Mims, a member of the local chapters of the Black Political Association and NAACP, addressing the newly seated council at Tuesday night's meeting. Harper said he's "humbled" to be Antioch's first black mayor. The City Council consisted of five white men when Harper moved his family to Antioch in 2001.

"This is a great responsibility that I do not take lightly," said Harper, 48, who is retiring as a police lieutenant in Tracy in January to devote himself full time to the mayoral position.

"It's time to go to work and put my money where my mouth is."

Harper did not dwell on his win Tuesday, instead laying out some immediate goals, including tasking the council with devising a strategic plan in January to reduce crime, promote economic development and improve quality of life.

He also wants to create and lead a committee to improve the notoriously crime-ridden area off Sycamore Drive and have the Police Department create an operational plan to "make a dent" in crime.

While Harper's election represents a watershed moment, it also illustrates that the city's black community is not necessarily uniform in its political views. While the city's first black council member, Reggie Moore, was at times critical of the Police Department, Harper's law enforcement background places him squarely in the corner of the city's tough-on-crime contingent.

Regardless of where they stand on policy issues, Moore, who served one term on the council, from 2006 to 2010, sees Harper's election as a "historic event."

"A council should reflect the diversity of the community, and I think Antioch has achieved that goal," Moore said. "To go from not having any (black council members) in its first 150 years to now having its second and third, it shows that Antioch has truly grown as a city that's diverse in nature."

Voters also re-elected longtime Councilwoman Mary Rocha, a member of Antioch's sizable Latino population. Latinos represent about one-third of Antioch's residents.

Antioch's election results show more progressive-minded voters are moving here, said Iris Archuleta, an African-American and founder of the Youth Intervention Network, which has worked closely with police to help troubled youths.

"I think there's a different type of mindset in the population. There's a lot more inclusion and acceptance for who people really are," she said.

Racial tension in the city peaked in the mid 2000s when black residents and civil rights groups said African-Americans in the federal Section 8 housing program were being targeted by police, resulting in several high-profile lawsuits, all of which have been settled or won in court by the city. A lawsuit claiming police misconduct was filed after a melee involving several black teenagers at a gas station in 2007; the suit was later settled.

And some say the racial tension that has occasionally surfaced in Antioch neighborhoods also manifested itself when black residents sought positions of leadership.

Back in 2002, Moore said he was told by some that Antioch voters would never elect a black candidate.

While on the city's Crime Prevention Commission in 2006 and 2007, Archuleta said she would receive "at least two to three" calls after commission meetings from people using racial slurs.

Harper doesn't dismiss the racial tension that has affected the city, but he said his focus is moving Antioch forward.

"I know all that exists, and I recognize (Antioch's) history and the challenges. But, for me personally, I come in looking for the best in people," Harper said.

Harper said he will work for all Antioch residents and "champion diversity," including in appointments on city commissions.

Mainly, Harper said he sees the election as a mandate from the community to fix Antioch's growing crime problem.

During the campaign, Harper said he heard from people of all races and ages in grocery store parking lots and during church visits about their experiences with crime.

"The people have given me a mandate, saying who better to understand how to get a hold on crime," Harper said. "Now, we have to go do it and get it done."

Contact Paul Bugarino at 925-779-7164. Follow him at [Twitter.com/paulbugarino](https://twitter.com/paulbugarino).