



BREAKING

FEATURED

Update 5:52 p.m.: Attorneys in excessive force case call for police reform, resignations; city officials weigh civilian police board



File Photo: Amanda M. Usher | The Valdosta Daily TimesAttorney Nathaniel Haugab... ▲

By **Amanda M. Usher** amanda.usher@gafnews.com

Jul 1, 2020



Update 5:52 p.m.: The Valdosta Daily Times has confirmed with the city that Billy Wheeler of the Valdosta Police Department was promoted to lieutenant in May and is still working road patrol.

Wheeler replaced a lieutenant that was terminated, said Ashlyn Johnson, city public information officer.

"Sgt. Wheeler was the next eligible employee to fill this position because he was in the 'highly promotable' band," she said.

She said the band system that VPD promotions operate on includes highly promotable, promotable and not recommended.

"The last promotion concluded the last week of January," she said.

VALDOSTA – After calling for the mayor's resignation, attorneys suing the City of Valdosta in an excessive force lawsuit have called for Valdosta Police Chief Leslie Manahan's resignation.

Also, city leaders issued a video statement Wednesday, stating the Valdosta Police Department has a low use of force rate and mentioned forming a civilian police review board.

The Copeland, Haugabrook and Walker law firm held a press conference Wednesday in connection with the lawsuit filed against the city for client Antonio Smith.

Smith, a 46-year-old Black man, was detained, thrown to the ground and suffered a broken wrist Feb. 8 after Valdosta police misidentified him as another man with a warrant.

"There's a direct chain of command there. The things that we have to understand about mayors and municipal governments, they have very limited power. They're essentially a cheerleader," Attorney Roy Copeland said during the press conference.

"They only preside over meetings and vote in instances of a tie. Fundamentally, the problem with the mayor is his ... adoption of the facts ... in spite of the fact he actually viewed, I presume, the same video that you all have viewed. How could any sensible person come up with a conclusion that is contrary to the notion that this man's civil rights were indeed violated?"

 Attorneys in excessive force case call for police reform, resignations

Mayor Scott James Matheson said in an interview with The Valdosta Daily Times last week the city has not discussed disciplining any of the officers involved in the incident, including Lt. Billy Wheeler, the one who body slammed Smith to the ground. The mayor talked about his love for the police force and how news of the use of force incident has been difficult for him personally.

The Valdosta-based law firm representing Smith called for Matheson to resign earlier this week.

Copeland accused the city of failing to be transparent and “dismantling the truth.”

Attorney Karla Walker said the city’s response to the case was tone deaf and the officials must be held responsible.

She said Valdosta must demand a “culture change” within the Valdosta Police Department and administration.

The Rev. Fer-Rell Malone Sr., president and chief executive officer of the Justice Initiative, said he is prepared to help remove Matheson and Manahan out of their positions.

“I’m tired of begging folk to do what they’re supposed to do when we have the constitution and authority and the power to pull them out of office,” he said. “So if the mayor doesn’t come out, we have means by which we can bring him out. If the police chief doesn’t come out, and the city (councilmen) is responsible for them, then one by one, let’s go and take care of all of them and replace them.”

He said Matheson “let the citizens of Valdosta down” by siding with the Valdosta Police Department.

Malone posed a question for Matheson.

“Given the police treatment of Antonio Smith and Kendrick Johnson and others, is Valdosta a safe place for Black people?” he asked. “As a Black man and as a father, should I view Valdosta as a place that’s safe to bring my family to vacations as I’ve actually done so many years?”

He said he is uncertain he’s safe to do so under Matheson’s leadership.

The city released a video statement Wednesday where Matheson deemed the city government as one for “all the people, all the time.”

Investigator Trevor Berry said justice must be served. Like Malone, he too believes Matheson, Manahan and officers involved should be held accountable

for the incident with Smith.

Matheson said in a joint statement recorded at City Hall with several members of the Valdosta City Council that transparency and accountability are goals of the VPD.

“The Valdosta Police Department takes all use of force cases very seriously,” the mayor said.

The VPD received more than 72,000 calls in 2019, Matheson said. The department recorded 24 incidents when officers had to use force to combat resistance in 2019 resulting in a 0.0003 percentage of police interaction, he said.

In 2019, the VPD recorded 3,398 physical arrests with a 14% decrease from the previous year, he said.

“The number of response to resistance situations in 2019 constitutes .007% of the arrests resulted in some type of response to resistance being deployed,” Matheson said.

“However, we’re here today, all of us, to say that any time a citizen has an encounter with a Valdosta employee that results in an injury, we’re truly sorry for that regardless of who’s at fault. That includes the incident involving Mr. Antonio Smith. We can always do better and we are always committed to doing so.”

Attorney Nathaniel Haugabrook II said he has spoken with law enforcement officers regarding training and was told the way Smith was “taken down” is not a standard practice in police training.

He said Wheeler handled the situation improperly.

“He should’ve inquired about what happened, what was going on, whether or not there was even a need to effectuate an arrest at that point,” Haugabrook said.

Smith was compliant during the incident with officers and was “accosted by Lt. Wheeler,” Haugabrook said.

“So the question is why was the lieutenant so aggressive towards Mr. Smith and I think we all know the answer to that,” he said.

Walker said police reform is long overdue not solely in Valdosta but nationwide. She said the response to Smith's case proves it.

"This happened in February. They've known since March," she said. "We've already had law enforcement experts to say many of the operations were incorrect. So yes, it's long overdue if we're in a culture where no discipline has happened and a promotion's happened."

Haugabrook advocated for civilian community boards to review complaints and the actions, or lack thereof, of law enforcement.

"That's what we seek in this case," he said.

Copeland encouraged a closer look at applicants, speaking psychologically, during the recruiting process for law enforcement officers.

During his statement, Matheson said City Manager Mark Barber brought up the idea of a citizen's review board at a June City Council meeting.

"The board would be a representation of our whole community with one person appointed from each council district elected by their City Council representative," Matheson said. "These representatives would meet with the police chief and the mayor on a routine basis to discuss police department related topics."

He said the city has met with African-American leaders to hear their thoughts on the issue of law enforcement.

He called the conversation critical.

"Those are the conversations that make a difference and help us move forward as a community, as a family, with the collective goal to make Valdosta an even better place to live for everyone."

View on valdostadailytimes.com



Tags

Scott James Matheson

Nathaniel Haugabrook li

Roy Copeland

Politics

Law

Police

Institutes

Mayor

Fer-rell Malone Sr.

Antonio Smith

Attorney

Military

Work

Billy Wheeler

[⬆️ back to top](#)

Valdosta Daily Times

© Copyright 2022 Valdosta Daily Times, 201 N. Troup St Valdosta, GA | [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

Powered by BLOX Content Management System from TownNews.com.