

**Rotary**  
Club of  
Charlotte



# THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

May 14, 2024

## 2023-2024 Board Members

President Edwin Peacock

Pres Elect Kim Brattain

Past Pres William Bradley

Secretary John Cantrell

Treasurer Craig Field

Exec Sec Christine Cipriano

### Directors 2022-2024

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Mark Norman

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Robert Shaw

### Directors 2023-2025

Patrick Baker

Linwood Bolles

Terri DeBoo

Andy Dinkin

Donna Dunlap

David Head

Joel Ford

Membership Terri DeBoo

Foundation Joe Morris

Programs Andy Dinkin



Reginald T. Johnson,  
Fire Chief,  
Charlotte Fire Department,  
City of Charlotte



Spencer Merriweather III,  
District Attorney,  
Mecklenburg County



Jacquelyn Bryley,  
Deputy Chief of Police,  
Charlotte-Mecklenburg  
Police Department



Moderator - Charlotte Rotary President-Nominee,  
Patrick W. Baker,  
City Attorney,  
City of Charlotte

## *Charlotte's Public Safety Forum*

by **Rick Handford**

**Patrick Baker**, City Attorney and President Nominee of our Club introduced the panel of three key leaders in the City of Charlotte. Deputy Chief Jacquelyn Bryley was standing in for Chief Johnny Jennings of the CMPD. She graduated from the Charlotte Police Academy in 1999 and was promoted to Deputy Chief of the Special Services Group in 2023. **Reggie Johnson** is our Fire Chief, and District Attorney Spencer Merriweather rounded out the panel.

Patrick started by asking us to spend a moment of silence in honor of the four public safety officers recently murdered here in Charlotte: CMPD Officer Joshua Eyer, NC Adult Corrections Officers Samuel Poloche and William Elliott, and US Marshall Thomas Weeks.

He then asked each of the panelists briefly describe their greatest challenges in providing their services and accomplishing their missions. Chief Bryley said that recruitment and retention of capable police officers was a priority and a struggle. They spend a lot of time working to find the best applicants and providing extra training where needed, but significant numbers of officers leave after around three to four years; not to go to other departments so much as to leave the profession entirely. Trying to find and retain qualified females is even more challenging. And of course, there is crime to be dealt with. She then asked that we take every opportunity to thank our police officers whenever we encounter them, not only because they deserve it, but because feeling appreciated by the community contributes to job satisfaction (and thus retention).

Spencer Merriweather focused on understaffing. The state provides funding for 64 prosecutors, with the city providing 21 at 60% of the funding provided by the state. He currently is eight positions short of the 85 for which he has funding. A city of our size and having the number of people commuting in and out each day would normally have 120 prosecutors. This shortage results in long delays in getting cases to trial, and needless misery for victims, and criminals on the street while awaiting trial, sometimes for up to four years.

Chief Johnson also focused on staffing, noting that they used to have 1500 to 2000 applicants every time they put out the help wanted sign, but now they have had to actively advertise to get enough applicants. The latest group was up to 1300, which was the most since 2018. Firefighting has historically been a white-male profession, and while they are actively recruiting people of color and women, it does take a long time to get proportional representation to change in an organization of 1100 people. Then there is the issue of Charlotte's growth (6<sup>th</sup> fastest in the nation), with new apartment complexes springing up on virtually every corner. As a rule of thumb, every new dwelling results in 0.38 additional calls for service. The load is currently 130,000 calls per year, and it is growing faster than the number of fire companies and fire stations, although the latest budget does provide for more growth. It still takes 3 to 5 years to bring a new station online with the equipment and firefighters to man it. It also takes more administrative staff, which nobody wants to pay for.

The CFD is also responsible for Emergency Management for the entire county, which requires staff to handle planning and response for everything from fires to earthquakes to terrorist attacks.

Patrick then observed that often when the blue lights of CMPD show up, CFD's red lights seem to be there as well. Chief Johnson responded that in his experience, which includes many departments around the country, the relationship between CMPD and the CFD is the best in the

country. They train together, work together, and plan together to provide the best and fastest response possible to every emergency. CFD has four stations around the city that are dedicated to providing support to police and SWAT teams when necessary, and they train together to provide coordinated responses when situations like the one two weeks ago occur.

The next question was to DA Merriweather, about what he saw as driving crime in our community. His response was that crime and poverty are correlated and that people who are exposed to crime and violence as children are likely to end up in the court system as perpetrators. He would like to see a family justice center that would address these issues and provide help to victims, breaking the cycle that results in victims, particularly children, from becoming perpetrators.

Chief Bryley was asked about the proliferation of guns in our city and our culture. While she favors responsible gun ownership (she was born and raised in Texas after all), what is being experienced in Charlotte is that gun owners are leaving guns in their vehicles. Criminals, notably juveniles, know this, so they break into vehicles looking for guns and all too often they find them. 'Responsible gun ownership' includes keeping your guns locked up and not left in your car, and especially not in your luggage when you go to the airport.

Patrick then addressed the perception that there is a 'revolving door' in the justice system, where police arrest criminals who then are put back on the street within a few days or sometimes hours. His question to Spencer Merriweather was if the perception was real, and what should be done about it. DA Merriweather's response was that the system is not working as it should, largely because it is underfunded. It is not enough to know that someone should be locked up—it has to be proven. Justice delayed is justice denied, and it is difficult to keep people incarcerated for years while awaiting their day in court. Some cases die while waiting—witnesses die or disappear, memories fade or fail. Making victims wait for justice does them a disservice and reduces everyone's faith in the system.

The next thing that Patrick asked was for each panelist to tell us what we need to know about their agency that had not already been discussed.

Chief Johnson stated that CFD has some exceptional people who provide exceptional service 24/7 every day of the year. The department has earned an ISO-1 rating, which is the highest possible, and this results in the lowest available insurance rates for homes and businesses. They are also accredited by the Center for Public Safety Excellence, something that only about 1% of fire departments achieve. CFD provides all-hazard service and responds to all situations that present a danger to the public. CFD is regarded as one of the best (in his opinion *the* very best) fire departments in the country.

DA Merriweather noted that he had been with the office for 17 years and that it is difficult to make a career being a prosecutor. People don't go into the profession to win cases but to be there to help people through their worst times and deliver justice. They see people in the midst of tragedy, and they carry that with them, in spite of the fact that they are credentialed lawyers and accept a starting salary of \$52,000 per year. They make tough decisions, including who is deserving of a second chance, who should get help with addiction or counseling for domestic violence instead of going to jail, and who should not. He is proud of what his people do to keep the community safe and hopes that we are as well.

Chief Bryley spoke of the fact that Chief Jennings had a vision of a police force delivering excellent customer service to all citizens, and CMPD is the only department in the nation that puts every officer through intensive customer service training. The officers do more than arrest bad guys, and have been described by some as "social workers with a badge and a gun". As an example, officers have been known to take kids to the DMV and help them get IDs so that they can get jobs. The officers are not on the force looking for glory or to make a lot of money, but to provide a service and be part of something bigger than themselves. No one calls 911 because they are having a good day, and the goal of every CMPD officer is to be the best part of someone's worst day.

We should all be proud and grateful for the exceptional people who put their lives on the line every day and work to keep us safe. We have some of the best public safety organizations in the country, and need to be aware of this in all of our interactions with them.

A recording of the meeting can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/947533510>  
The program introduction begins at approximately 24 minutes 25 seconds.