I have been experiencing a rapid and uncomfortable period of personal growth in the last two weeks and I wanted to share some of my thoughts and experiences with you.

Two weeks ago I first became aware of the movement to defund the police.

I actually hesitated to use the phrase “defund” in this statement because I know that it causes an immediate defensive reaction in the listener. It certainly caused that defensive reaction in me but I think it’s important to use the words that are already part of our national conversation. I consider myself to be an open minded person, but until that moment I never even considered the possibility the solution to police reform might be to start over. Even though I have watched police violence end the lives of many black and brown citizens in this country, and I have heard the parents of black children express their fears over the safety of their children in situations that hold no danger for me or my children, I still assumed that police reform meant more training, better training, more equipment or different equipment.

So now I am actively learning what this phrase means and what this movement stands for and I want to invite the rest of the Council to join me. What does police reform look like if we completely change the frame of reference for public safety?

Many East Lansing citizens have written in this week to express their anger over the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, and they are calling on us to make meaningful police reforms within our own community. Many people referenced the recommendations Campaign Zero and their 8 Can’t Wait list, demanding that we immediately take action to implement these recommendations in East Lansing’s use of force policy. The only problem with that is that our use of force policy already closely aligns with those recommendations and they were in place when both of the recent use-of-force incidents that injured African American men in East Lansing occurred. Can we strengthen them? Yes of course we can, and we will, but if this type of thing can happen in a community where we are already doing everything right according to recommendations on progressive policy then where is there left for us to go?

We equip our officers for the worst possible scenario even when they are performing duties that are relatively mundane and free of threat. We send heavily armed and armored police officers to direct traffic at road accidents, to quiet loud parties and to intervene in suicide attempts or drug overdoses. We are expecting our officers to be social workers, mental health professionals and nurses but we outfit them as if they are going into an active duty combat zone.

On the other side of the equation we are leaving solutions that would address those non-violent problems practically unfunded. According to our strategic priorities our goals as a city are “strong neighborhoods” “vibrant economy” “enhanced public assets” and “environmental sustainability.” The only place in our priorities that police are mentioned is under the neighborhoods heading where we write that we want to “expand the relationship between the police and the community.” In our Master Plan we outline other priorities as well. “Human Dignity Community Education and Civic Participation,” “Economic Sustainability,” “Housing,” and “Transportation, Infrastructure and Environmental Sustainability.”

I spent a little bit of time with our City Budget last night and made some comparisons that I found particularly shocking. Partially these observations were shocking because I had never even thought to question them before.
Firstly our Police and Fire departments are lumped into one category, “public safety.” It’s not surprising
that “Public Safety” takes up a huge percentage off our discretionary dollars, since paying for services is
the purpose of property taxes. We pay for things like sewers, garbage removal and yes, law
enforcement, because it isn’t practical for individual households to cover those costs.

However things seem incredibly out of balance.

In our entire $108,000,000 city budget Public Safety is 24.6%. Of the areas which represent the things
that we claim to be a priority, Health, Welfare and Community Development (which is all one category
by the way) is 4.8%, ”Culture and Recreation” (again one category) is 10.3%.

Out of that huge “overall” budget number our General Fund, which is the only part of the budget that
we really have control over allocating is $40,600,000. Public safety accounts for 65.8% of that money.

Looking at the police department specifically, the departmental budget is $13,300,000. 94% of that
budget is coming out of our general fund. Only 3% of our general fund dollars are going to that “Health,
Welfare and Community Development” category. We have a culture of crime prevention that prioritizes
enforcement rather than the type of community building that has been proven to reduce the causes of
crime. Our “social service and economic development assistance” budget is $35,000. Just to pick a
completely random example to compare that to our “street lighting” budget is over $1 million dollars.

I remember one anecdote shared by Chief Sparkes during public safety presentations proceeding the
passage of the income tax regarding minimum police staffing levels. He recalled a day when there were
three separate police calls which exceeded the number of officers on duty. If I’m remembering correctly
one of those was an accident on 127, one was an attempted suicide and one was a fight.

Reimaging that scenario where the people dispatched to each of those scenes was not an armed police
officer but some other type of employee. Possibly a PACE officer who had been trained in traffic control
could direct traffic at the accident scene. A social worker or mental health professional would be
dispatched to attend to the suicide and a de-escalation team could be sent to break up the fight.
Imagine a possibility in which none of those calls required an armed and armored police officer.

I think the question is not “do we have enough police to respond to every crime scene” but rather “why
are we having police respond to things that aren’t crimes?” Obviously, this would require a significant
investment of public resources into different types of training. We have already outlined the community
that we want, it’s listed in our strategic priorities for anyone who can google it. We have been acting as
though the only money that is available for those programs is the relatively modest 34.2% of our
discretionary spending that is left over after we fully fund the police department at their current
capacity. I would like you, both the council and our community, to consider the fact that that is not
necessarily true.

So as we move forward with the conversation about police reform I would urge my fellow council
members, to open their minds to the possibility that police reform doesn’t mean a dictated set of rules
regarding which specific techniques are acceptable and which aren’t. Please allow yourselves imagine a
police department that is so radically altered that it looks completely different from the department
that we’re currently operating.
I don’t think that a town of East Lansing’s size should be operating a jail. I would like to seriously look at defunding the portion of our police budget related to operating a jail with the reallocation of that money towards racial equity and community building programs.

Last night the East Lansing Board of Education passed a budget that does not include funding for a community resource officer. I followed up with two board members after the meeting to confirm that that was a policy decision not a budgetary decision and was told that it was not funding related, that they have decided that they do not want a police officer stationed in our schools. Half of that salary came out of the public safety budget. I don’t have the exact number but based on the average wage in the department our half of that should be in the range of $30,000. Which is coincidentally is approximately the amount of money that was cut from the Human Services budget for grants to community agencies last year. As a good faith gesture towards increasing our investment in community programs I would like to restore that funding. I’d also like to express my personal opinion that even restoring the $30,000 of Human Service funding that was cut last year that budget is laughably small and that if we are going to claim that one of our “aspirations of the City’s vision” as outlined in our master plan is “Human Dignity, Community Education and Civic Participation” that we had better start putting our money where our mouth is.