# A RIGHT TO BE HEARD

**IN THE FACE OF CONTENTIOUS RHETORIC AND TRAGIC VIOLENCE, BURIEN DOUBLES DOWN ON IDENTIFYING AND PROVIDING THE SERVICES ITS COMMUNITY NEEDS.**

By TED KATAUSKAS / Photographs by MIKE KANE

**ON JANUARY 9, 2017**, following one of the most divisive national elections in US history, the City of Burien adopted Ordinance 651, which prohibits its law enforcement personnel and city staff from asking or collecting information about anyone's immigration status or religious affiliation. It didn't matter that Burien's police services provider, the King County Sheriff's Office, had already had a "don't ask, don't tell" policy about immigration status in place since 1992; as a service provider itself, the 25-year-old city was responding to concerns from local immigration rights activists. In this South Sound community of 51,000, where 23 percent of the population is foreign born and which famously boasts more *quinceañera* shops than Starbucks franchises, the activists wanted proof positive that the City of Burien had their backs amid the uncertainty sown by an immigrant-unfriendly White House administration that had rallied campaign crowds with a promise of mass deportations and chants of "Build that wall!"

"The media had labeled our city a 'sanctuary city,' but from a policy standpoint, Ordinance 651 doesn't change how our police will be acting: our officers have never asked about immigration status," says Emily Inlow-Hood, Burien's communications officer. "But what it does do is extend that policy to all city staff, and it codified that we will never ask about immigration status."

Aside from building trust within a sizable—and growing—constituency (since 2010, Burien's Latino population has more than doubled to 24 percent, while its white population has contracted from 76 percent to 64 percent), Ordinance 651 also addressed public safety concerns: residents worried about divulging their immigration status might be less likely to report crimes. For a city that the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* ranked behind Tukwila, Seattle, SeaTac, and Auburn in an October 2016 survey of violent crime statistics in 33 King County cities, crime reporting is no small concern. And the addition of a religious affiliation stipulation to the ordinance stemmed from the experience of the neighboring City of SeaTac, which amid the immigration paranoia of the 2016 presidential campaign had dismissed an interim city manager who had asked the city's GIS staff to

City of Burien Mayor Jimmy Matta in city hall

The Alvarez Garcia family prepares for a *quinceañera* celebration at Angelica's Bridal Boutique and Spa Salon in Burien.

generate a map identifying where SeaTac's Muslims lived.

"The council didn't want that to happen here," says Inlow-Hood.

After a heated round of public testimony that packed Burien's council chambers, the ordinance was approved by a four-to-three vote, dividing the council and exposing a rift that was opening within the community.

"Ordinance 651 has rubbed some people the wrong way because it gave overt legal standing in our community to a practical police policy that not everyone wanted to face," explains Irene Danysh, a Burien resident and college professor currently teaching the principles of "active citizenship" to nonprofit leaders in Ukraine. "When people stand up for their rights, not everyone is comfortable."

The discomfort in Burien would only escalate during the summer and fall of 2017. On July 7, Burien's city clerk received a citizens' initiative petition from Respect Washington, an organization with ties to a Michigan hate group, threatening legal action if Burien's council failed to either pass a resolution to repeal Ordinance 651 or place a proposed repeal ordinance on its November general election ballot. Unsettlingly to the city's immigrant community, according to Respect Washington, the petition had been signed by more than 3,735 registered Burien voters. After another bout of rancorous debate and public comment at city hall—so rancorous that at one meeting, Burien's mayor ordered police to clear council chambers—Burien's electeds narrowly voted to submit the repeal measure to voters. Immigration rights activists sued, and in September a superior court judge struck the measure from the ballot. Late in October, Respect Washington countered by mailing a scandalous flyer to every resident who had signed its petition, asking them to vote for four council candidates (including an incumbent who, it indicated, had signed its failed repeal petition) who were running for reelection under a Burien Proud, Burien First ticket. The flyer also listed the addresses of Burien residents with Latino-sounding names (under the headline "These Are Illegal Immigrants") who had allegedly committed crimes.

## MATTA FIRST CONSIDERED RUNNING FOR OFFICE WHEN A STRANGER CONFRONTED HIM IN THE PARKING LOT YELLING, "YOUR PRESIDENT IS GONE, AND YOU'RE GOING HOME!"

On October 30, Deputy Mayor Nancy Tosta addressed a crowd that had gathered in Burien Town Square for a press conference convened by King County Executive Dow Constantine.

"I have not seen or felt this kind of hate before, hate with a desire to cause harm or see hurt come to others," said Tosta, whose seat was also up for reelection. "Hate does not empathize; hate sees enemies. Hate does not allow you to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Hate assumes the worst about others. Respect Washington has and continues to fuel hate in this community, and I for one am willing to stand up and condemn what they are trying to do to us!"

Burien Town Square

And the majority of Burien stood behind her, upending its council at the polls a week later, rejecting the Burien Firsters, reelecting Tosta, and installing the city's first two Latinos and its first LGBTQ councilmember—all political novices—at city hall.

**HOW DOES A CITY RECOVER** from that kind of acrimony?

It starts when a formerly all-white city council appoints a Latino as its mayor. At a council meeting on January 22, 2018, when it came to a vote, the three newcomers rallied around the nomination of Jimmy Matta, a union leader and commercial contractor ("We are at a very historic moment in the history our city," said Pedro Olguin, followed by Krystal Marx, who said, "I believe it is time to elevate the experiences and skills of people who have been held down, in addition to recognizing that experience comes from many different places."), while three of the four council veterans supported Nancy Tosta.

"I know our city, and I know our council would fare well with either choice as mayor," said Councilmember Austin Bell, a fourth-generation Burien resident and University of Washington graduate student who has served on the council since 2015. "So when I think about this, I also think about the symbolic vote we are taking. Trust in government has been decaying over these last decades, and it has only gotten worse with the rhetoric we hear from our national government. Today, I think it's very important that we send a strong signal to the members of our community who are most concerned that we are listening and that there's change afoot. That is why I am very excited to cast my vote for Jimmy Matta."

The room erupted in applause as Matta's name was placed on the dais, and the city's first Latino mayor took his seat at the center of the council.

"I believe I can bring the healing to this community that we need," said Matta. "I love Burien; I've lived here for 20 years. Am I going to have some hiccups up here at this dais? Yes. Am I going to have some hiccups as mayor of this city? Yes. The one thing I can tell you I won't have a hiccup on is the value of making sure that everybody is heard. It doesn't matter how you stand on issues. What matters is that you are heard."

When Matta first considered running for office (after the local Women's March in January 2017, when a stranger confronted him

## Common Cause

### Q&A MYUNG LEE

*Myung Lee, executive director of Cities of Service—a nonprofit founded in 2009 by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg while he was in office—discusses how officials and citizens can work together for the greater good.*

**Cities of Service is known for impact volunteering. What is that?**
It is a little bit different than traditional volunteering as you and I know it, in that it is the city that's actually reaching out to the community and saying, "Hey, we would like to solve XYZ problems, and we would like you as the citizens to help." In the past few years, we have been expanding the work we do to go beyond impact volunteering to look at how cities can engage their citizens better to co-design, co-create, and co-resolve issues that the cities have.

**Is trust harder for cities to come by in current times?**
There is all kinds of research that talks about how people don't trust government; however, there is also promising data that show that trust at the local level is higher than it is at the federal and state levels. I think that's because you have government officials at the local level that are going to the same grocery store that you do, the same coffee shop you do. Even in New York City, the mayor goes to the Y around the corner from my house.

**Does that give local leaders an advantage in building trust?**
In some ways it's advantageous, and in some ways it's not—running into your constituents on a daily basis, you're going to be able to have a better finger on the pulse of what's happening in your city and the challenges constituents are facing. It's also a double-edged sword, because then you're held accountable for things you can't control. In most cities, the mayors don't control schools (because the states do), yet when the kids aren't learning or teachers are unhappy, most of the people are going to start yelling and screaming at the mayor.

**You say town hall meetings are not the way to solve things. Why not?**
Town halls can be one part of a bigger strategy, but at some point, we got away from a democracy where it's representative and people are having conversations and working together to solve problems to one

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**“EVERY CITY HAS ITS PROBLEMS. AS OPPOSED TO POINTING A FINGER AND ASSIGNING BLAME, HOW DO WE WORK TOGETHER TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR OUR CITIZENS AND OUR COMMUNITY?”**

**—BRIAN WILSON BURIEN CITY MANAGER**

Burien City Manager Brian Wilson

in the parking lot of a Safeway, yelling, “Your president is gone, and you’re going home!”), he confessed his doubts to a friend, who replied, “You know, Jimmy, you have a story that needs to be told, because some people will find common ground.”

Accepting that logic as his mandate, on the campaign trail Matta shared his story with whoever would listen, about how his parents emigrated in 1976 from Guatemala to the United States to escape a civil war and about his life growing up as the son of itinerant farmworkers: how his family relied on the generosity of food banks, what it was like as a kid to sleep in a van without heat during the winter, that his father died of a drug overdose, that his mother still mows lawns in Burien because she can’t afford to retire.

Now that he’s Burien’s mayor, Matta’s story resonates even more, especially to the Latino community, which has embraced him as their *alcalde*.

“After the election, we’re seeing many more Spanish speakers coming to our council meetings and to the front desk at city hall for pet permits and other licenses,” says Inlow-Hood. “For whatever reason, people from the Latino community didn’t feel comfortable coming to city hall, but they do now.”

Councilmember Olguin puts it this way: “When you have someone that looks like you and reflects your experience in the community, you feel more welcome.”

Being the new public face of Burien, Matta relied on City Manager Brian Wilson to assemble and oil the civic machinery that would restore community trust in local government.

“When I took this position, there was division on the council and certainly some division in the community,” says Wilson, a Burien native hired as city manager in May 2017, after serving as police chief and chief of staff for Federal Way’s mayor. “One of the reasons I took this position is that I grew up here; I’m from this community.... Every city has its problems. As opposed to pointing a finger and assigning blame, how do we work together to make a difference for our citizens and our community?”

That means doing things like staffing Burien’s front desk with Spanish speakers, offering a multilingual translation service for incoming calls, and making interpreters available at all city functions.

“I will make a business case for this as well,” Wilson adds. “The service we provide our citizens, whether it’s public works or parks—we need to have a staff that represents the community we serve. We’re going to provide better service if we do that.”

One of the first, and most important, strategic hires Burien’s new administration made following the election was Colleen Brandt-Schluter, the city’s first full-time human services manager. Based on recommendations from a new citizen-staffed human services commission, Brandt-Schluter will coordinate grant funding to local nonprofits providing social services like housing assistance, homeless shelters, food pantries, and youth programs. Currently, the seven-member commission is evaluating 60 requests for funding that nonprofits have submitted for the next biennium, requests totaling nearly $950,000. Even though the city only has $347,000 to work with (compared to Redmond, a similar-size city with a human services budget of $784,135), Wilson welcomes the opportunity to make an impact.

“Our city council took the important step of trying to figure out how to better serve our most vulnerable residents by creating this position,” says Brandt-Schluter, a 12-year veteran of the human services department at SeaTac, where she managed a budget of $515,000. “The goal is to improve the quality of essential services here in Burien. It isn’t going to matter where you go in south King County; you’re definitely going to feel the suburbanization of poverty and the challenges of pretty flat budgets and not huge revenue streams while trying to address increasing needs.”

It’s not the only area in which Burien hopes to make the most of limited resources. This spring, tapping its professional services budget, Burien partnered with nonprofit Global to Local to launch an innovative outreach program, Community Connectors, that it pioneered at the City of Tukwila. Circulating flyers in five different languages (from Spanish to Tigrinya, an Eritrean dialect), Burien recruited and trained residents who identified as African Ameri-

can, Latino, and Nepalese/Burmese—as well as elders and youth—to serve as liaisons between the city and their particular constituencies, facilitating communication and advising the city about how to be more culturally sensitive in its outreach efforts, such as by helping hone the wording of questions in a community survey the city will deploy to guide budgetary decisions in the coming year.

"This is important work because communities do want to be civically engaged," stresses Global to Local's leadership and engagement manager, Niesha Brooks. "You don't know what you don't know; relationship-building and civic engagement is like getting to know a neighbor you've never had a chance to meet."

Wilson even applied that vein of thinking to the selection of Burien's new police chief. After the city's longtime chief retired, Wilson invited the community to participate in the selection process. In addition to a multilingual online survey (asking residents to explain what they most wanted in a new chief and their police department), with help from Inlow-Hood and Brandt-Schluter, in March Burien began hosting the first of seven roundtable discussions at a variety of venues, including coffee shops and a King County Housing Authority apartment complex populated primarily by non-English speakers. One meeting, held in the city's community center, was conducted in the format of a presidential town hall debate, with a moderator (Wilson) asking four finalists to answer a series of questions submitted by the audience (e.g., "What will you do to develop anti-racist policies and practices in the police department?") and then asking the audience to score the candidates by their responses.

"We took great pains and plans to really reach out to the community to get that feedback about what people are looking for in their police services and their police chief," says Wilson. "We needed to be able to reach out to many diverse communities with different languages and interpreters and go out to different neighborhoods. We're pretty pleased with that process."

**THE LARGER PROCESS OF COMMUNITY** healing, however, remains a work in progress. On March 28, just when the city seemed to have put the rancor of 2017 behind it, tragedy struck. Late that evening, two teenage girls were shot and killed in a spate of alleged gang-related violence at Alturas, an apartment complex that's home to more than 600 families, predominantly non-English-speaking Latinos. The next morning, students and parents arrived at Highline High (where Latinos outnumber whites by nearly two to one) to see that the school's spirit rock had been defaced, spray-painted with a swastika and the letters "KKK." There ensued candlelight vigils, marches, and rallies; demands that the city do something about gang violence; and murmurs that Ordinance 651—and those who supported it—were to blame.

On April 2, an emotional crowd again packed council chambers, and dozens of citizens spoke their minds. This time, though, instead of allowing the situation to escalate, the city called an intervention, spreading the word in several different languages that there would be a town hall meeting: a community conversation about violence and how to prevent it. A week later, Burien Library's multipurpose room resembled a US citizenship ceremony, a jumble of people of all ages conversing in a Babel of languages mixing with city staff and the council.

"That was a galvanizing moment," says Inlow-Hood. "There where people are just yelling at each other.

**What's an alternative?**
In Detroit, the mayor does these meetings called house meetings in people's living rooms. The host invites neighbors and friends, and the mayor asks three questions: What is it that we do well, what should we improve at, and what's your dream for your neighborhood? Around those questions, they have a conversation. His staff furiously type on their computers to find the answer to questions that come up. They try to solve issues with the citizens as they're sitting there. The mayor gets to share information and recruit people to join his efforts, and the residents get to have their questions answered and their concerns addressed. It's a win-win.

**The immediacy of that is great.**
Even when he has to say, "There's nothing I can do because I don't control that," people appreciate the fact that he's listening and paying attention and trying to do something. He's telling you the answer even if it's not the answer you want to hear.

**How else can a city build trust among elected officials and citizens?**
Focus on a problem at hand that everyone can agree is a problem. For example, if there's a park in your community that is a haven for illegal activity, that is something that everybody can agree is a problem. Coming together as city officials and citizens gives you the opportunity to showcase the strengths and the resources that each side can bring to the table, regardless of political parties or ideologies or anything else that could get in the way.

**How can government officials harness the energy of people who want to make their communities better?**
Some cities are going out to citizens and saying, "We've got problems; we want you to better help us analyze the data because we don't have the resources internally." Some cities are opening up their government to complete co-design, collaboration, and participation from citizens—entering into contracts about what everyone will bring to the table—and there are others that are writing city constitutions in conjunction with their citizenry. There's definitely a movement afoot.

**Anything else we should know about building trust?**
It doesn't happen overnight. It is built over time, based on one act after another after another. Cities also have to communicate and close the loop. If you're going to survey people to get their insights, you have to get back to them and say what you did with those insights; you can't just take and not give back. Like any other relationship, it takes time and effort, but it's worth it in the end.

Mayor Jimmy Matta speaks at the April 9 town hall held in Burien Library.

were 140 people at that meeting, and the way we structured it, we said, 'You're not going to come and yell. We're going to sit in circles [and talk to each other].'… There were a lot of youth in the room, maybe 25 percent were high school students, people from the apartment complex where the shooting happened. We had Spanish and Vietnamese interpreters there. It was really interesting because people who had been really divided and vocal were sitting side by side, listening to kids talk about what had happened." And when they were done, a representative from each group reported to the larger assembly the gist of what had been discussed.

Patricia Mejia, a counselor who runs the parks and rec department's teen program, stood up and talked for her group, a cross-section of Burien's youth.

"We spent a lot of time digging deep into the individual situations they've been through, and they feel like a lot of the adults in this community aren't—I don't want to say failing them—but they aren't really listening to what's actually going on.… We have a lot of kids who need us as adults to step up and really start listening to them and help them as individuals, but also make them feel safe at home, at school, at their apartments."

In other words, in their city.

In the weeks that followed, Burien chartered a task force to tackle youth violence and reached out to stakeholders to help restart a social services program at Alturas that had been defunded. The mayor's teenage daughter even volunteered to revive the city's youth council, reporting to the main council about her progress. And on April 17, the city hired its new police chief: Ted Boe, an 18-year veteran of the King County Sheriff's Office, who promised the audience at his community interview on April 12: "One of the things a police chief needs to do is to be engaged in the community. If I become your chief, you are going to meet my wife, you are going to meet my 5- and 8-year-old daughters, you are going to see us at the grocery store, you're going to see us at the church."

Just like Burien's mayor. Following the shooting, Jimmy Matta spent many days at Alturas, where teens jockeyed to take Snapchat selfies with their *alcalde*, and many hours on the phone, cold-calling parents of kids who needed help, counseling them in Spanish. On April 24, when a group of family and friends of one of the girls who was killed organized a march from city hall to the site of the shooting and back again, Burien's mayor marched right with them.

"I always thought I would just plant a seed," he says. "I didn't think I'd win my election and be the mayor, what I am today. I am very humbled by the councilmembers who asked me to step up and be mayor. I am very humbled by the respect I've received from my city manager and people coming up to me asking, 'How can we do this better?' To have a staff person say, 'You know, you opened my eyes.' To have people say, "Can I give you a hug?' I believe we're going to change people's minds and hearts, one person at a time."

As Matta was marching down Ambaum Boulevard alongside teenagers from Alturas, a heckler shouted, "Mayor, you're going to have blood on your hands until you change your policy on immigration!"

"These kids are hearing this while I'm walking," the mayor recalls. "So I tell the kids, 'Hey, he has the right to say that. We have the right to run for office, and one day you'll be able to do that like I did.' What Respect Washington did is, they divided our community. But at the end of the day, I will always believe that love will win. And we won, right?"


Teen program assistant for the City of Burien Patricia Mejia (center) interacts with teens at a Teen Late Night event at Sylvester Middle School.

TOWN HALL IMAGE BY AARON WELLS PHOTOGRAPHY