Rich City Rides’s Rally Against Police Misconduct

Advocates assemble at Oakland City Hall to lend support to Najari Smith, arrested and jailed for ‘loud music’ during an organized ride earlier this month.

By Roger Rudick  |  Aug 24, 2018  |  3

S enay Alkaebulan, president of the Oakland chapter of Red Bike and Green, a community group that promotes cycling in the African-American community, was riding his bike on 14th Street in Oakland this morning to attend a rally to protest
police stops of people of color, when he was himself pulled over by an Oakland motorcycle cop. The cop started to write him a citation for wearing ear buds while cycling (and yes, it is technically illegal to ride a bike with ear buds in both ears) when a white guy on a scooter went by in the other direction, also with earbuds, riding on the sidewalk. Alkaebulan pointed out the scooter rider and “the cop said he could have stopped him too, but ‘I saw you first.’”

The cop let Alkaebulan off with a warning and gave him a bicycle safety fact sheet from Bike East Bay; the same sheet Alkaebulan hands out to people on the rides he organizes. The incident turned out to be a perfect illustration of the purpose of the rally, held by Rich City RIDES in front of Oakland City Hall, to protest selective police enforcement of minor infractions—also known as “riding while black.” Najari Smith, founder and Executive Director of Rich City RIDES, was arrested earlier this month—and spent the weekend in jail—after a cop stopped him for playing loud music while leading a group of young people to a Friday Night Bike Party ride.

Walter Riley, Smith’s lawyer, standing and addressing Oakland officials in the Mayor’s conference room. Smith is, at left, in the "Rich City" t-shirt.
Publicity for the incident finally led to the Oakland police backing off the charge, at least partially. “Charges for playing amplified music are not being pursued by the Oakland District Attorney,” confirmed Smith at the rally. But it’s unclear if charges would be fully dropped, just not pursued at this time, he explained. The protesters also want disciplinary action and retraining for the arresting officer. Walter Riley, Smith’s lawyer, said the Oakland Police Department still has not provided body-camera video of the arrest.

During today’s rally, which had about 60 attendees, a smaller group of approximately 12 advocates met with Shereda Nosakhare, Chief of Staff to Mayor Libby Schaff, and Matt Nichols, Oakland’s Policy Director, Transportation and Infrastructure. “We’re tired of having these discussions,” said Cathy Leonard of the Oakland Community Policing Advisory Board, about the disproportionate number of bicycle stops against people of color. She added that she still feels she has to teach her family members to “fear the police.”

Smith and others in the group decided it wasn’t fruitful to talk with the mayor’s deputies, and asked to arrange to schedule a meeting with the mayor herself, who was out. The mayor’s staff promised to set something up.
The meeting and rally were also attended by several members of Bike East Bay, including Ginger Jui, its Executive Director. “Our whole staff are out here to support holding Oakland police accountable,” she said. The organization’s Education Director, Robert Prinz, continues to provide data to show that the stops of Alkaebulan, the arrest of Smith, and other incidents involving people of color are far from isolated.

“Here’s the pie chart breakdown of bicyclist stops and searches by race for 2017,” he posted on Twitter. “Keep in mind that the 2017 estimate of Black residents in Oakland is around 24 percent and White is around 27 percent.”
The charts reflect the frequency with which a cyclist is searched during a stop. From Rob Prinz’s twitter feed.

Alkaebulan, meanwhile, stressed to the mayor’s staff that while Smith’s arrest led to a humiliating and terrifying stay in jail, the incident could have been far costlier to a man who doesn’t own a business and have the kinds of political connections Smith has. (Richmond Mayor Tom Butt wrote a letter to Alameda County District Attorney Nancy O’Malley and Oakland Mayor Schaaf asking that the charges against Smith be dropped).

“What about someone who gets sent to jail and doesn’t show up to work for two days? I don’t know too many people who can do that and keep their jobs,” he explained. “That moment can be life or death.”
Smith said just getting the charges dropped won’t be enough. He wants an end to selective enforcement and racially motivated traffic stops. “We have to change the practice, because the practice is the policy.”