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Talk turns testy

BY ANDREW KENNEY, STAFF REPORTER

SMITHFIELD — Last week's County Commissioners meeting turned into a lengthy and emotional debate about torture and law enforcement.

Members of N.C. Stop Torture Now returned to the board to hear its response to requests the group made in February.

The group claims Aero Contractors, a company based at the Johnston County Airport, flies terror suspects around the globe for torture and interrogation at CIA "black sites." Last month, Stop Torture Now asked commissioners to require the Airport Authority to ban such flights and refer the matter to law enforcement. "There are points in our lives where we face difficult decisions," Allyson Caison told commissioners last week. She cited articles in The New York Times and the Los Angeles Times as evidence against Aero. Floyd McGurk, a Vietnam veteran with a military family, gave the commissioners a history of the United States and torture. "Don't they understand that torture doesn't work?" he said, reading an e-mail from an officer in Iraq.

Walt Caison, another member of Stop Torture Now, had a testy exchange with Commissioners' Chairman Wade Stewart.

After Stewart pointed out that President Barack Obama had apparently banned torture and rendition flights, Caison said he was not so sure.

"I'm not a fool," Caison said. "I wasn't born yesterday."

Stewart told him that the group should be on the White House steps instead.

"This is Johnston County, and we're not about to investigate rendition flights around the world," he said.

"We have to deal with water and sewer; it's way over our heads."

Hearing this, Caison said everyone knew what was "going on" and said there was a "good-old-boy cover-up."

"I'm getting terribly offended that you would imply that I'm part of some cover-up," Stewart said, the conversation growing more heated as the two men spoke over one another.

When Charles Fager, another veteran, took the stage, he encouraged commissioners to use the county's judicial tools to look into the matter. "You do have a district attorney and a prosecutor," he said. "This is not about the past; this is about the future."

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Stewart recognized the group's passion but said his beliefs differed from theirs. "I don't think any of us condone torture," he said. "I will shoot straight with you; I'm still not convinced that some torture, like waterboarding, is not effective and that there's irreparable damage."

Commissioner Tony Braswell said commissioners could not act based on "innuendos" and "misrepresentation."

Commissioner Allen Mims took offense to a comment by Walt Caison, who had implied that CIA rendition programs targeted Arabs and were racist.

"I've been called a racist," Mims said. "Is [Johnston County NAACP President] Timothy Hodges here? I want to ask him if I'm a racist."

Allyson Caison then asked why the board was "so scared of an investigation" and said commissioners would have instantly investigated accusations of drug running or child pornography. Mims replied that the group was "down here trying to bully local government" because it could not "get it done" at higher levels of government.

The debate continued to focus on whether there was evidence of wrongdoing. Commissioner Jeffrey Carver said Stop Torture Now was committing "character assassination," and he discredited the group's sources.

"I've read the London Times; I read those papers, and they're very liberal," he said.

As the debate drew to a close, Stewart said he would ask Congressman Bob Etheridge to call for an investigation, though he said he would not necessarily do so in writing.

"I will personally bring it to Etheridge's attention," Stewart said.

"He's my cousin, and I'll talk to him too," chimed in Commissioner Cookie Pope.

Mark Payne, attorney for Johnston County, helped wrap up the conversation.

He noted that the board could not order Sheriff Steve Bizzell to do anything and that any law enforcement action would likely have to be on the federal level.

"You have the proper debate in front of the improper board," he said. "The question is not any of the debate you've had in front of you; it's what you can and can't do."

Finally, Stewart asked commissioners if any of them wanted to make a motion to support Stop Torture Now's requests.

"You have heard the same silence I have," he said after a moment. "There will be no action by this board of commissioners."

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