

Hillsborough NAACP chief says Mayor Jane Castor snubbed national leader

The mayor sent a late Sunday email to the local branch president citing a scheduling conflict.



Tampa Mayor Jane Castor responds to questions about former Tampa Police Department Chief Mary O'Connor's departure at the Tampa Municipal Office Building on Monday, Dec. 5, 2022, in Tampa. Chief Mary O'Connor resigned Monday after an investigation showed she violated department policies during a traffic stop when she flashed her badge and asked an officer to let her and her husband go. [ANGELICA EDWARDS | Times]

By **Charlie Frago** *Times staff*

TAMPA — When Yvette Lewis read the late Sunday evening email informing her that Mayor Jane Castor wouldn't be attending a Monday morning meeting with a national NAACP leader, she wasn't surprised.

"Some people don't like accountability. And the mayor is one of those people," said Lewis, shortly before the proposed 9 a.m. meeting.

Relations between the Mayor Jane Castor and the largest NAACP branch in the state are at a low ebb, Lewis said. The last-minute snub of her invite from more than a week ago was the latest example, she said.

"We used to meet once a month. Then every other month. Then it gets few and far between. We should be meeting with the mayor at least once a month," said Lewis, who said she last met with Castor in March.

Lewis said it was about the same time that she started to hear rumors that Castor was recruiting someone to challenge her as president of the Hillsborough branch of the national civil rights organization.

[Lewis won reelection in November over Tarance D. Le’Noir](#), but the vote turned acrimonious, with Bishop Michelle Patty and Joe Robinson, longtime activists in Tampa’s Black community, claiming the election was tainted.



Yvette Lewis, Hillsborough County NAACP president, speaks to council members during a board meeting at the Hillsborough Area Regional Transit Authority Headquarters on Tuesday, Nov. 29, 2022, in Tampa. [JEFFEREE WOO | Times]

Lewis said the charges are spurious and said she believes the mayor ran an opponent against her with the help of Patty and Robinson. Patty and Robinson attended Castor’s reelection kickoff in Ybor City last week.

“It’s very disheartening that a mayor would interfere like that,” Lewis said.

Castor spokesperson Lauren Rozyla did not immediately respond to a voicemail request for an interview or comment from the mayor Monday morning.

Lewis forwarded Castor’s 8:33 p.m. Sunday email in which the mayor cited an unspecified conflict for declining the invitation.

“It is my sincere hope that we can re-establish our quarterly meetings with you and the executive board, in addition to having an opportunity to participate in an open dialogue with the general membership for the first time. Hearing from the local members who reside in the city limits is critically important as my

I look forward to hearing from you about potentially scheduling another meeting with National and State representatives, and receiving a response to the correspondence my office sent in July requesting a follow-up meeting with you and your executive board. We have made a significant amount of progress addressing the concerns that were raised in our first meeting and would like to update the group on what has taken place,” Castor wrote.

Patty said Lewis’s version of events about her and the mayor’s involvement “is a blatant lie.” Patty resigned her local branch membership after receiving a suspension letter on the letterhead of the national NAACP.

Under Lewis’s leadership, Patty says, the local branch “has only been a thorn in the mayor’s side to cause divisiveness” instead of tackling issues like the high murder rate and injustices in housing and education.

“It’s sad that the head of a prominent civil rights organization would throw out such allegations without one scintilla of proof,” Patty said.

Robinson also accused Lewis of lying.

“That’s slanderous,” Robinson said when asked if it was true he was working on behalf of Castor.

Robinson’s NAACP membership said he has been suspended by the national organization, along with three other local branch members, pending an appeal

The NAACP didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment. The official in town to meet with local leaders was Roger Jackson Jr., the national chief of field and membership for the Baltimore-based civil rights group, according to Lewis.

Lewis questioned why Castor didn’t want to take the opportunity to engage Monday.

“What are you running from? Why not have a conversation?” Lewis said, adding she had invited the mayor in a Dec. 3 email and a follow-up phone call to her office on Thursday.

“Where is the level of respect for the NAACP or our national office?” Lewis said, citing issues like “Biking while Black” and “Renting while Black,” shorthand for Tampa Police Department programs that disproportionately targeted Black bicyclists and encouraged landlords to evict people who had been arrested. Castor was formerly police chief.

The mayor hasn’t been forthcoming about her branch’s questions about those practices as well as what many see as an effort to gentrify Black neighborhoods in West and East Tampa.

Eventually, the civil rights group might try to force those answers in court, Lewis said.

“If litigation is what we need to get answers, then that’s what we’ll do,” Lewis said.



CHARLIE FRAGO
Tampa City Hall Reporter