

Written by Kathy

Sunday, 22 May 2022 15:27 - Last Updated Tuesday, 24 May 2022 14:59

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**By Kathy Wray Coleman, associate publisher, editor-in-chief**

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**CLEVELAND, Ohio**-Cleveland police, in cooperation with the Cuyahoga County Sheriff's Office and the Ohio Highway Patrol, arrested more than a dozen Black men over the weekend who ride their dirt bikes in Cleveland off the roads, arrests pursuant to a sting operation dubbed "Wheels Down," and with no prior warning since the practice of dirt bike riding, whether lawful or unlawful, went on routinely under former Cleveland mayor Frank Jackson, the city's four term Black mayor. And county and state law enforcement officials also went along with the free-for-all practice of dirt bike riding in Cleveland without legal consequences, one that is under attack now in almost what comes off, say sources, as advertising by city, county and state officials for a hard-on-crime approach with young, Black men and boys as pawns.

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The heightened arrests of Black, male dirt bike riders in Cleveland comes during a political season, Ohio a pivotal state and Cleveland a pivotal city.

According to police records, 15 of the arrests resulted in felony arrests on Sat, May 21, and 30 citations were issued coupled with the confiscation of 15 vehicles. Also, two firearms were seized during Saturday's dirt bike sting operation in Cleveland, police said, and two of the confiscated vehicles had allegedly been stolen. Current fines run between \$50 and \$100 for driving an unregistered dirt bike in Cleveland and a first offense is a second degree misdemeanor, though city council is expected to approve heightened penalties and fines at its regular council meeting Monday evening. A proposed new ordinance would boost the fine to \$1,000 and the penalty for a first offense to a first degree misdemeanor.

Community activists say they object to heightened criminal penalties and fines for dirt bike riders and that increasing a first offense from a first degree misdemeanor to a second degree misdemeanor is problematic as first degree misdemeanors of such type are harder to get expunged.

Jackson retired last year as mayor and was succeeded by current Mayor Justin Bibb, 34 and Cleveland's fourth Black mayor. Bibb must work with the 17-member, all Democratic Cleveland City Council and its new president, Blaine Griffin, to be effective, Griffin a Black east side councilman representing Ward 6 and Jackson's protege who once was director of the city's community relations board.

Governed by outgoing Democratic Cuyahoga County Executive Armond Budish and an 11-member bipartisan county council, Cuyahoga County includes Cleveland, a largely Black major American city. It is a roughly 29 percent Black county and a Democratic stronghold, and is the second largest of Ohio's 88 counties, behind the heavily Democratic Franklin County, which includes the capital city of Columbus.

The crack down on what city, county and state law enforcement officials say is against crime during a gubernatorial election year has been labeled "Wheels Down," a law enforcement sting aimed at stopping illegal off-road vehicle activity in the city that is quickly being branded racist by Black leaders, many of whom wanted to remain anonymous for this article for fear of reprisal. One Cleveland council person called the activity "open season on Black people in Cleveland by top level White law enforcement figures from across the state that puts the safety and freedom of Black children at risk."

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Some residents and west side councilpersons in particular complained repeatedly during Jackson's last term of the problem with the city's dirt bike riders and requested his intervention. But the then mayor, a city council president-turned mayor, did little in response and, instead, unsuccessfully sought an ordinance to build a dirt bike track.

Jackson's grandson Frank Q Jackson, who was shot and killed in September of 2021 at 24-years-old, and while he was mayor, was an avid dirt bike rider.

Some Black leaders say the obsession with the Black dirt bikers in Cleveland is racist and that sudden felony arrests in droves of young Black men by the city's overwhelming White police department, aided by a largely White county sheriff's office and majority White state highway patrol officers, is not the answer. Others say that operation "Wheels Down" went forward without any true community dialogue or input, particularly from Cleveland's Black community since Blacks are largely the target of the sting. Critics also say that it is politically motivated as Ohio Gov Mike DeWine, a GOP incumbent, faces Democrat and former Dayton mayor Nan Whaley for an all out showdown for governor in the upcoming November general election, an election in which Ohio's U.S. Senate race is also being closely watched nationwide.

Also at issue, among statewide, congressional and other offices on the ballot this November, is the fight to replace retiring Ohio Supreme Court Chief Justice Maureen O'Connor, a Republican and the first woman elected to the high court post in Ohio, a majority Republican and largely female court of seven justices, three of them Democrats.

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**By Kathy Wray Coleman, associate publisher, editor. Coleman is a seasoned Black Cleveland journalist who trained at the Call and Post Newspaper for 17 years and an experienced investigative and political reporter. She is the most read independent journalist in Ohio per Alexa.com**

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