

A Walkertown dialect? Not to speak of, town says

Fallout from negative reference to a community speech pattern grates on the local sense of pride, identity

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The talk in Walkertown started soon after a captain from the town resigned from the Forsyth County Sheriff's Office, citing, among several examples of perceived disrespect, a supervisor's request that he consider speech classes because he "talked Walkertown."

In this town of about 4,000, where roots can run as deep as pride, those words "hit a nerve," said Sarah Welch, a member of the town council.

"When things are said like 'Walkertown talk,' then we might immediately jump to the defensive," said Dot Duggins, a former town-council member.

"We are strong-minded people, and how people look at us is important."

Duggins, upset at Sheriff Bill Schatzman, wrote a letter to the Winston-Salem Journal.

Schatzman was not the source of the remark, but the captain, Mickey Southern, believed that Schatzman had been behind the request.

Schatzman has since said that he has never made an issue of employees' manner of speech. He has called accusations against his office political, since he is up for re-election this fall.

Schatzman said yesterday that he hopes to sit down with Walkertown leaders to talk about any concerns. His office has received good reviews from residents about how it has handled recent accusations, he said.

As news of "Walkertown talk" made the rounds in recent weeks, Welch began to hear the same question again and again.

"So everyone in Walkertown said, 'So, how do we talk?'" Welch said.

The straightforward answer, most probably, is that Walkertown natives speak the same way as other people in the Piedmont, with perhaps a few local touches, according to Walt Wolfram, a linguist at N.C. State University who studies dialects in the state.

But there is more behind the issue.

"The problem is language is ultimately never about language," Wolfram said.

In a tightknit town, a perceived attack on identity can lead to strong feelings.

It may be a reasonable idea to ask someone to take a speech class if it's done tactfully and without the negative perception that many people attach to speech therapy, said Karen Long, a corporate speech pathologist in Greensboro.

Speech is a skill that can be improved with work, said Long, who works with a scientist to improve the clarity of his writing and has clients of foreign descent whom she helps speak English with less of an accent.

Long also gets clients who are native English speakers looking to be well-understood by those who

don't have their accent.

If the request isn't taken well or is asked tactlessly, then the issue is likely to become hot.

"People might say, 'Could you modify your language so you don't sound so uneducated and rural?'" Wolfram said.

"They're really saying something that goes way beyond language, and that's why it's such a sensitive issue," he said.

"The people I've talked with have been quite upset by it," Duggins said. "And I suspect it'll be shown in the votes - the lack of votes that (Schatzman) gets in Walkertown."

Welch, who attends the same church as Southern does, was more cautious.

If true, the comment is upsetting, she said.

In an election year, she said she takes anything people say about elected officials - or that the officials say in response - with a grain of salt.

In Mickey's Country Kitchen, at the corner of N.C. 66 and Main Street in Walkertown, there was no discussion about local dialects yesterday.

A steady stream of customers from all over the region came in - some to eat a hearty breakfast of grits, bacon, pancakes and such, and others to sit with friends and neighbors over a cup of coffee. A line of people waited patiently for takeout orders.

"I had never heard the term 'Walkertown speak,'" said Olin Parrish, 67, who has lived in Walkertown all of his life. "I don't know of anything we're saying that identifies us as Walkertown."

Other customers agreed.

"Just Southern," said Melody Pearman, a Walkertown resident. "Southern drawl."

When asked about the town's dialect, some people seemed to find the topic funny, responding in an exaggerated Southern drawl. Most said they think that people in Walkertown sound like everyone else in the area.

Just one person disagreed - Boyd Oakley, who has lived in Walkertown for 42 years.

"We probably get Walkertown dialect here," he said. "We don't talk too fast, we don't talk too slow. People from Walkertown are friendly."

In Walkertown, where Southern - a son of the former mayor who goes to one of the town's biggest churches - lives, some anger remains.

Southern said yesterday that he still is upset about the request, but the more he thinks about it, the more he believes that it was a personal attack on an image as a law enforcer that he embraces, not an insult to the entire town.

He said he was asked to consider classes to work on his diction, public speaking and his enunciation.

"I'm not a public spokesman, I'm a street cop," he said.

Southern resigned in early May. News of his resignation broke amid a spat between Schatzman and Southern's father-in-law, state Sen. Don East, R-Surry, over what East said was inequitable discipline of deputies, including Southern, who had been at parties on county property where alcohol was served.

Southern had been a lieutenant in the sheriff's office under former Sheriff Ron Barker. Schatzman

had made him a captain.

In his time as a deputy, Southern grew fond of considering himself and other deputies from Walkertown as a group that could joke about their smalltown background.

He said that the image of a captain didn't fit with "redneck jokes" about being from a small town.

"I wasn't looking at it as a joke with my speech pattern or my image. That was getting personal," Southern said.

Part of the problem, said Long, the speech pathologist, is that people assume that speech therapy is needed only by people who have something wrong with them.

"Our voice and our speech and how we communicate are attached to who we are," she said.

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