

# Remembering the Past, Impacting the Future in Charlotte

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Recently, I had an opportunity to sit down with **Willie Ratchford, executive director of Community Relations for the City of Charlotte**. Willie just celebrated 40 years working with the city, and I wanted to get **his perspective on how community relations and engagement have changed throughout the years**. I was also curious to get his take on the current role of local government considering the drastically different community landscape.

When Willie started with the city, the year was 1975. During that year Microsoft was founded, “Saturday Night Live” premiered, the Thrilla in Manila took place and the blockbuster hit “Jaws” was filmed on Martha’s Vineyard. We may have social media and 3D video games today, but one of the most popular (and odd) gifts for kids during the holiday season in that year was the Pet Rock. So yes, times have changed. Significantly.

Willie has seen a lot throughout his life and career - from the desegregation of schools to his involvement in the administration of Charlotte’s fair housing law in 1988. In 1994, Willie became the executive director of Community Relations. He felt that this role was a defining moment in his career because he had the opportunity to impact race relations in Charlotte. **He firmly believes that it is the responsibility of local government to promote community harmony.**

“We have to be mindful of the diversity mix of where we live, and local government should reflect that,” said Willie. “We have to understand the residents and know the services that they need from us. The city has an obligation to be an inclusive community.”

This obligation is exactly why the City of Charlotte established Community Relations.

As local government, we have to take the time to understand what the community wants out of a relationship and how they want to be engaged. **Willie notes that the community wants leadership by example.** He's right. Engaging the community has to be a priority because we all play a role in the success of our city. There is a growing opportunity to have meaningful dialogue with residents about what matters to them the most. We can empower them and make them feel part of the growth and development happening every day.

So, how have things changed from 40 years ago? Willie believes the change has been major.

"It used to be that local government seemed to have had all the power, but about 25 years ago, neighborhoods began realizing that they, too, have power," said Willie. "We have strong neighborhood associations in our community."

People want to be involved with local government and be viewed as a true partner. We have seen that here in Charlotte with the amount of participation at public meetings, engagement via social media and even new online tools to solicit feedback.

We've come a long way in 40 years, but the work is not done yet. We can't simply rely on previous methods of engagement, but instead have a focus on reaching people in new and exciting ways. We, as local government, need to continue the conversations, bridge the gap in the community and promote a sense of collaboration to continue making Charlotte a great place to live, work and play.