

# Look at what Allentown's talking about — a citizen board — what are we talking about?

The Bethlehem Gadfly Police September 3, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts about the Bethlehem Police* 

*Gadfly's doing a lot of whining these days. Trying to meet his 3rd quarter quota set by the national Gadfly headquarters.*

*So Gadfly also whined Tuesday night at City Council about lack of visible plan, time-table, direction for discussion of police issues.*

*The 6-hour Public Safety meeting was August 11 (George Floyd was murdered May 25). Long presentation by the police. 27 members of the public weighed in — vigorous point-counter-point. No response at August 18 Council. Basically no response at September 1 Council. Gadfly senses no visible plan, no visible process.*

*Council listened. Gadfly would like to know what they heard.*

*More whining to come.*

*from Andrew Wagaman, “Allentown officials debate how much power to give citizen body focused on police reform.” Morning Call, September 2, 2020.*

Allentown officials are poised to create a citizen body to keep tabs on its police department, but it remains unclear whether they will — or even can — give it any teeth.

City Council's public safety committee on Wednesday reviewed the first draft of a bill that would create a Citizens Public Safety Advisory Board. At this point, the board would, among other things:

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- Provide city residents and business owners a forum to voice concerns about specific police interactions, identify “critical,

systemic or recurring issues,” and facilitate necessary changes to local police practices.

- Recommend new programs, activities, policies, or policy amendments that would benefit public safety or help improve the relationship between police and the community.
- Strive to increase access to police data and other police-related public information, and promote a better understanding of police’s responsibilities.
- Issue annual reports on its activities to elected officials.

Council will introduce a formal bill Sept. 16, and more progressive council members hope to give the citizen board additional investigatory powers.

Council members Ce-Ce Gerlach and Joshua Siegel initially called for the creation of a citizens police review board to independently investigate police use-of-force incidents and improper police conduct, among other things. While acknowledging that state law prevents such bodies from imposing disciplinary measures, both Gerlach and Siegel argued Wednesday that the advisory board should still investigate incidents and make disciplinary recommendations.

“I don’t want this to be a board of placation or platitudes. I want it to have at least some kind of authority,” Siegel said. “There’s got to be some catharsis at the end of the day, some kind of outcome.”

The public safety committee consists of Council President Daryl Hendricks, Councilman Ed Zucal and Councilwoman Candida Affa — the three most vocal supporters of the police department on council. Only those three can vote to advance bills or resolutions for a full council vote, though other council members can propose amendments prior to a final vote.

Zucal said the working bill creates a board that complies with state law and with the city's police union contract. Hendricks called the first draft a "great step forward."

"This becomes another tool for transparency between the community and law enforcement," he said. "It's a great start for the community to have more direct input with the police services we provide."

If Allentown creates such a review board, state law would limit its investigatory powers, Martin argued. The city police department's Office of Professional Standards remains best suited to conduct personnel investigations, he wrote.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania, in its own letter last month to City Council, disputed Martin's interpretation. It argued that police forces can in fact share certain information with citizen bodies for personnel or administrative purposes, and that information related to compliance with a use-of-force policy is for such purposes.

Martin and the ACLU also disagreed over the release of body camera audio and video footage, with Martin arguing that a 2017 law prohibits departments from sharing such recordings with the public if they include information relating to an investigation, among other things. The ACLU maintains departments have fairly broad latitude to share recordings.

Allentown's board would consist of five to seven voting members who have lived in the city for at least three years, plus the city police chief or a designee, and possibly, the public safety committee chairperson.

The mayor would nominate voting members, and council would confirm them. Five of the appointees will specifically represent the city's West End, Center City, East Side, South Side, and the Hamilton Street business corridor.

According to the draft bill, board members must complete a police department-provided "orientation and education program" within six

months of being appointed, unless they've previously completed an Allentown Citizens' Police Academy course. Each board member must participate in at least one police ride-along a year, and at least one board member must be a licensed social worker or have recent training in social services.

Gerlach also said she wants the final bill to require the board to be racially and ethnically representative of the city, and floated the idea of including a youth representative. In addition, she suggested that if board members are required to participate in police ride-alongs and a police education program, then they should also be required to attend a restorative justice seminar or something similar.