

Allentown City Council debates police reforms

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing, Police July 30, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts responding to the George Floyd killing* 

We should be paying attention to what's happening in Allentown.

from Andrew Wagaman, "Allentown City Council debates police reform proposals, including reallocation of funds." Morning Call, July 29, 2020.

A package of proposed police reforms, including cuts to the department's budget, roused lively debate between Allentown City Council members Wednesday night and solicited passionate letters from the city's police supporters and community activists demanding change.

Council's meetings remain closed to the public, so it spent another hour listening to some of the 200-plus comments on a resolution emailed by Wednesday afternoon. Council then spent two more hours reviewing proposals point-by-point with city Police Chief Glenn Granitz, Mayor Ray O'Connell and other administrators.

The resolution calls for a number of police reforms, including:

- the creation of a citizens review board to look at cases of alleged excessive force, among other things;
- reallocating some of the police department's funding to departments or nonprofits that can "more appropriately address" mental health issues, drug and alcohol treatment, housing and social services, among other things;
- requiring officers to intervene to stop any excessive use of force;
- calling for the state attorney general to investigate allegations of excessive use of force;
- making body camera footage available to the public;

- removing any exceptions for chokeholds and neck restraints from the use-of-force policy.

Ahead of Wednesday's meeting, Lehigh Valley Stands Up, which is among the organizations keeping reform at the forefront, asked council to pass the resolution as written and to develop a plan for shifting \$25 million from the police department to other forms of public safety and community support. The city police budget is about \$40 million, and 95% of that is personnel costs.

Allentown's public unions and some business owners were among those who adamantly objected police budget cuts.

Jeremy Warmkessel, president of the Allentown firefighters union, called the defunding proposals "short-sighted and dangerous" and if passed would jeopardize the security and safety of firefighters and other first responders, among other unintended ripple effects. "I along with my membership have a right to be protected, and it's this council's responsibility to ensure that protection," he said.

Nicos Elias, a city funeral home owner and former city 911 dispatcher, said knee-jerk reactions to recent disturbing incidents would lead to a "sharp rise in crime and lawless behavior." "This police department needs more funding, not less," he wrote, adding, "We have a very good police chief and a department to be proud of."

Resident Jadyne Sharber argued that Allentown needs to increase funding of nonpolice community safety resources for the benefit of residents and police officers. "It has become undeniably clear that expecting police officers to fill the roles of domestic violence specialists, drug crisis specialists, mental health experts, student support staff, social workers, and soldiers simultaneously is unreasonable, unrealistic, and unsafe for our communities," she wrote.

Chief Glenn Granitz Jr. said he agreed that systematic reform of policing is needed, but the primary way to go about it is statewide legislation that supports, among other things, more training.

Granitz indicated that some of the proposed reforms, such as removing all exceptions for use of neck restraints, making body camera footage public and demanding investigations by the attorney general, runs afoul of state law and is not in the city's authority to change.

The police chief also urged council members to next time take up his offer to participate in a use-a-force simulator offered this year before the protests. The police chief said he "saw moments like this coming," and that to prepare for such moments, "we owe it to ourselves to educate ourselves."

After listening to City Clerk Mike Hanlon read public comments Wednesday night, Gerlach said she was disappointed the final sentence about reallocating a portion of the department's budget crowded out more discussion on the numerous proposed accountability and transparency measures. She asked her colleagues to think long-term and embrace policies that remain effective regardless of the capabilities of future police leaders, and may in fact act as safeguards against bad leadership. She also reiterated her conviction that it's not radical to suggest the city rethink how it deals with mental health, substance abuse and homelessness issues, among other things.

O'Connell suggested the city needs the county government to "step up to the plate more" to address deficiencies in those service areas, and Council President Daryl Hendricks pointed out that the pandemic forced police officers to take on more responsibilities of furloughed social workers rather than the other way around.

Hendricks also pushed back against the contention that social workers can handle domestic disturbance calls (which statistically prove more dangerous than most) or mental health situations similar to the one that

unfolded outside St. Luke's-Sacred Heart last month. "There's no way a social worker was going to confront that gentleman in the condition he was in," he said.

Granitz reiterated that more resources rather than less would help him enact community policing measures he believes will rebuild trust between the most marginalized communities and officers. He also noted that divestment would set back efforts to increase the force's diversity given the success of recruitment efforts in more recent years.

The conversation concluded with a few council members addressing some of their loudest critics. Gerlach lamented the number of commenters whom she felt were trafficking in divisive language in order to dismiss reformers and shut down debate, and specifically called out those calling protesters "thugs" or using other racist caricatures.

Councilwoman Candida Affa said Gerlach should also call out those chanting "F*** the police," chanting derogatory remarks about Hendricks at previous protests or "calling up the mayor in the middle of the night" — a jab at Siegel, who shared the mayor's personal cell phone number with protesters.

Siegel apologized to the mayor but also pushed back against drawing what he considers false equivalencies between chants of protesters representing marginalized communities that have "faced 400 years of structural oppression and death and violence" and the "racism and vitriol" he perceived in many of the letters opposing police reforms.

"We can both praise the cops for doing good work while re-imagining public safety in this country and looking for ways to spend our money better," he said. "...Change and real leadership is about confronting institutions and having uncomfortable conversations, not doing something we all agree on."

to be continued in next post . . .