

## Vallejo trying to meet 'common ground' concerning police oversight

Speakers include family members of Sean Monterrosa, Shawny Williams

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The City of Vallejo has taken what it hopes are the first steps toward “common ground” over answers to the relationship between its embattled police department and the community it serves.

A special Vallejo City Council meeting Tuesday night focused on the police oversight model workshops of previous months, as well as the five drafts that the organization, Common Ground, has drawn up.

Common Ground is a broad-based, non-partisan organization of diverse religious and non-profit organizations in Solano and Napa counties that aims to build relationships within and across communities, as well as equip members with leadership and organizing skills to act together on concrete issues facing the communities.

The Common Ground draft for police oversight, currently in its fifth version, is 39 pages, according to Vallejo City Attorney Veronica Nebb and Vice Mayor Rozzana Verder-Aliga. City council members commended Common Ground for its presentation on Tuesday.

Councilmember Cristina Arriola said she doesn't have the fifth draft of Common Ground proposal yet, but says she'd like to go with what Common Ground is doing for a police oversight. Councilmember Pippin Dew also says Common Ground should continue to be included in the conversation.

In 2019, the City of Vallejo commissioned the OIR Group for an Independent Assessment of the Operations, Internal Review Systems and Agency Culture of the Vallejo Police Department. The OIR Group report was released to the public in June 2020, outlining 45 recommendations to modernize the Vallejo Police Department and to address reform issues.

One of the key recommendations from the OIR Group and from the California Department of Justice is Recommendation 45, providing that the Vallejo Police Department “should work with City leadership to create a model of independent oversight that is specifically tailored to meet the needs of Vallejo.”

Speaking virtually on Tuesday night was Vallejo Police Chief Shawny Williams, who said he was in favor of police oversight but stressed “the time is now.” Vallejo City Manager Mike Malone said Tuesday night that the VPD is currently working with 87 filled positions in a budget that is slated to have 130 people.

“In the last few years we’ve worked hard to do this, but we wanted to make sure it’s embedded in our system,” Williams said. “We need strong civilian oversight. I strongly support it and whatever model we decide is best for us. The urgency of now is fierce. So I’d like to see this adopted tomorrow (Wednesday).”

When asked by Councilmember Hakeem Brown what type of model of police oversight that Williams preferred, Williams stated that “everything should be transparent. If there is a police commission, I support that as well. I do believe that there are times that you need someone outside of the police department. It needs to be more open and transparent and more subjective.”

Williams’ statements came after a presentation by a nearly 90-minute presentation from Randy Risner detailing the meetings with the community over the past few months, featuring in excess of 150 people. During the past few months participants were encouraged to join small breakout groups and asked to rate a series of statements about police oversight model characteristics.

Councilmember Mina Loera-Diaz echoed Williams statements when she said the model needs to be picked soon.

“Police oversight across the nation is needed, but police oversight in Vallejo is well overdue,” Loera-Diaz. “But there are costs, the lives lost that have no cost. The grief the families face is something I can’t imagine. You can train, mentor, supervise, train whatever, but when a person is a bad person there’s just a bad person ... I’m just read to go on this.”

There were 18 public speakers during the meeting, including Ashley and Michelle Monterrosa, the sisters of the late Sean Monterrosa, who was shot and killed by Vallejo Police Officer Jarrett Tonn on June 2, 2020. Tonn believed Monterrosa was reaching for a gun in the parking lot of a Walgreens on Redwood Street, when in fact the victim in fact had a claw hammer in his sweatshirt pocket.

“We can’t have the police union investigate themselves, specifically in my brothers’ case where evidence was destroyed,” Ashley Monterrosa said. “So when we do have people or OIS situations, we can’t have police police themselves. Because that’s what happened on June 2, 2020. So instead of saying ‘How could we have done better this time around, why are we not saying, ‘How do we prevent this?’ This shouldn’t be an us vs. them conversation.”

Michelle Monterrosa urged the council to use Common Ground’s work.

“We made it our family union to be involved with the community and to advocate for the necessary changes,” Michelle Monterrosa said. “Because if there was a police oversight

model in 2018 then Sean would still be here and I wouldn't be here in Vallejo advocating the way I have. So it's more of less talking around the bush. I appreciate you (the council) having this presentation, but you have people dedicated two years into putting research to putting a model together for you guys to select."

During the past few months a questionnaire was sent out asking if a certain topic was not important, somewhat important, important or extremely important.

Vallejo staff members also interviewed officials from 17 cities in California, Oregon, Colorado and New York that have some form of police oversight in order to hear firsthand information about other jurisdictions models and their experiences. According to Nebb, cities selected were not intended to be comparison cities but instead just a survey of different cities.

The cities in California included Oakland, Los Angeles, Santa Rosa, San Jose, Long Beach, San Diego, Fresno, Berkeley and San Francisco.

Richmond is a hybrid model with a budget of \$277,000. Riverside has an annual budget of \$175,000. They have a staff member that works in the city manager's office part time. Officer-involved shootings are handled by the recommendations of a review board to the city manager.

The survey showed 93 percent not in favor of citizen boards appointed by the city manager. Citizen boards appointed by the chief of police were not favored by 83 percent in polls. Citizen board with auditor/inspector general (powers differ) were favored by most (79 percent). An auditor only board was disfavored by most (75 percent).

Citizen board and/or auditor/inspector general has subpoena power was favored by most (87 percent). The option of some disciplinary decisions to be made by Citizen Board or by the auditor/inspector General instead of the Chief of Police was disfavored by most (62.5 percent). The option of the board/auditor makes recommendation concerning discipline, but Chief makes the final decision was favored by most (63 percent.)

Nebb said the Tuesday meeting is just the beginning and that the city will have two or three more meetings where the council and community will be invited. Vallejo Mayor Robert McConnell said selecting the oversight model is a long process but it needs to happen preferably in September or October and if extra sessions are needed then members must be made available. No date has been scheduled for the next special council meeting.