

Vallejo City Council shows early support for forming strong police commission

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VALLEJO – The Vallejo City Council Tuesday expressed support for a strong police oversight model, with a majority in favor of a police commission based on the one used by the city of Oakland.

The council held a special meeting to review the results of a three-month outreach plan soliciting recommendations from the community on which oversight model would best reform the police department, which has killed 19 people since 2010.

While no formal vote was held, the council said it wanted to see more of a model presented by Common Ground, a non-partisan group of religious and non-profit organizations in Solano and Napa counties, which is advocating for a three-prong approach: a civilian police commission, inspector general, and community police review agency.

The commission made up of Vallejo residents would be tasked with overseeing a review agency, which would investigate officer use of force, including fatal shootings by officers, any in-custody deaths, and allegations of racial profiling by officers.

An independent inspector general would ensure the police department is complying with its policies and policing practices.

“We believe the above components provide the transparency and the community involvement needed to establish police oversight and are a critical step in restoring trust between law enforcement and the community,” said Renee Sykes, a member of Common Grounds’ public safety committee. “The national spotlight is still on Vallejo, and it will not be shut off until there is a concerted effort on everyone’s part to make a change.”

The council also heard from Mike Nisperos, who previously served on the Oakland Police Commission and briefly served as interim executive director of Oakland’s Community Police Review Agency.

Nisperos said Common Ground’s proposed model was the only complete option presented at Tuesday’s meeting.

“The community’s discussion and recommendation can be guided and focused by this document rather than asking their input to the nebulous framework of disjointed bits and pieces,” Nisperos added. “It is a proposal from the community to the community, it should not be hidden away.”

He asked that Common Ground’s model be placed on the city’s website so it can be reviewed by the community.

Nisperos currently serves on Vallejo’s civil service commission and he and Sykes are members of Vallejo Police Chief Shawny Williams’ advisory board.

Retired Santa Rosa City Attorney Brien Farrell, another member of Common Ground, said police oversight is necessary. He brought up the city’s expulsion from its risk management insurance pool and the practice of some members of Vallejo police bending the tips of their star-shaped badges following their involvement in a shooting.

While not mentioning them by name, Farrell called out former City Manager Greg Nyhoff and former Police Chief Andrew Bidou for taking no action regarding the badge bending tradition.

“We had a former city manager and a former police chief, who when this unthinkable perversion of sanctity of life, secret cult, was brought to their attention, they decided to turn their heads the other way and do nothing about it,” Farrell said. “That is not acceptable.”

Common Ground's proposal also earned an important endorsement from Ashely and Michelle Monterrosa, whose brother Sean Monterrosa was shot and killed by Vallejo police Det. Jarrett Tonn during the early morning hours of June 2, 2020.

"We've made it our family duty to be involved with the community, to advocate for the necessary change because if there was a police oversight model in 2018, even prior to that, Sean would still be here," Michelle Monterrosa told the council.

Ashley Monterrosa said it was important to have independent oversight of the police department.

"We can't have the police union investigating themselves specifically in my brother's case, evidence was destroyed," Ashley Monterrosa said, referring to Vallejo police ordering the repair of the windshield of the truck Tonn fired through before even confirming that Monterrosa had been killed.

Williams himself spoke in favor of new oversight during Tuesday's meeting.

"I welcome and strongly support civilian oversight. Our community deserves a greater voice in how we provide public safety services to increase trust," Williams said. "The time is now. I would like to see this happen tomorrow."

Vallejo City Attorney Veronica Nebb said the city's outreach plan for reform models included nine meetings over the last three months. Nebb, along with Chief Assistant City Attorney Randy Risner, presented what they called "unscientific data" on what type of model those in attendance wished to see. They also presented various oversight models used by 17 other cities.

Nebb said her office hasn't vetted the recommendation from Common Ground, which provided its fifth version to the council.

"We have a ways to go," Nebb said about the draft model submitted by Common Ground. Nebb further said she hoped to leave the meeting with enough of an idea of what the council wants so staff can begin to draft a model.

She said that there are four oversight options: a citizen board appointed by the city council, a citizen board appointed by the city manager or chief of

police, a citizen board with an auditor/inspector general, or no board with an individual auditor/inspector general only.

Nebb cautioned against having the commission or auditor imposing officer discipline, taking the power away from the police chief.

“It can create some departmental management issues if the chief does not participate in disciplinary decisions and have decision making authority in an overall paramilitary organization that can become a challenge with managing the department,” she said.

Nebb said such a model would cause recruitment and retention issues as well.

Nebb said that Tuesday’s meeting was only the beginning as additional council meetings are planned for the future as the council eventually selects an oversight model.

“We are working our way through this fairly slowly so that the council and community are all on board and have the most information available,” Nebb said.

Councilmember Mina Loera-Diaz said she was “glad” the city was discussing police oversight, saying it was “long overdue.”

“Police oversight and reform at a national level is something that is needed but police oversight and reform in Vallejo is just way overdue,” she said.

Loera-Diaz also addressed the concerns that oversight will be expensive to implement and maintain.

“Money invested in police oversight that has teeth, that can actually hold people accountable, is money well spent,” Loera-Diaz added, stating the city has already paid a high cost with the number of “lives lost” to police violence.

“The grief that families face, I can’t even imagine,” she said. “I have children. I can’t even imagine that.”