

BILL WOULD LET POLICE SEEK DAMAGES

Nassau proposal gives cops chance to request penalties from protesters

BY ROBERT BRODSKY
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Nassau County minority leaders and activists are calling for the rejection of a Democratic-proposed bill that would elevate police officers to a “protected class” while allowing them to seek financial damages against protesters for “discrimination.”

The legislation, which is up for a vote in the Republican-controlled county legislature on Monday, would add police officers and other “first responders” to the county’s Human Rights Law, which protects individuals from discrimination based on their race, religion, gender and sexual orientation. No other profession is included in the law.

The legislation, sponsored by Legis. Josh Lafazan, a Woodbury independent who caucuses with Democrats, and Legis. Delia DeRiggi-Whitton (D-Glen Cove), would allow the county attorney to sue on behalf of officers if

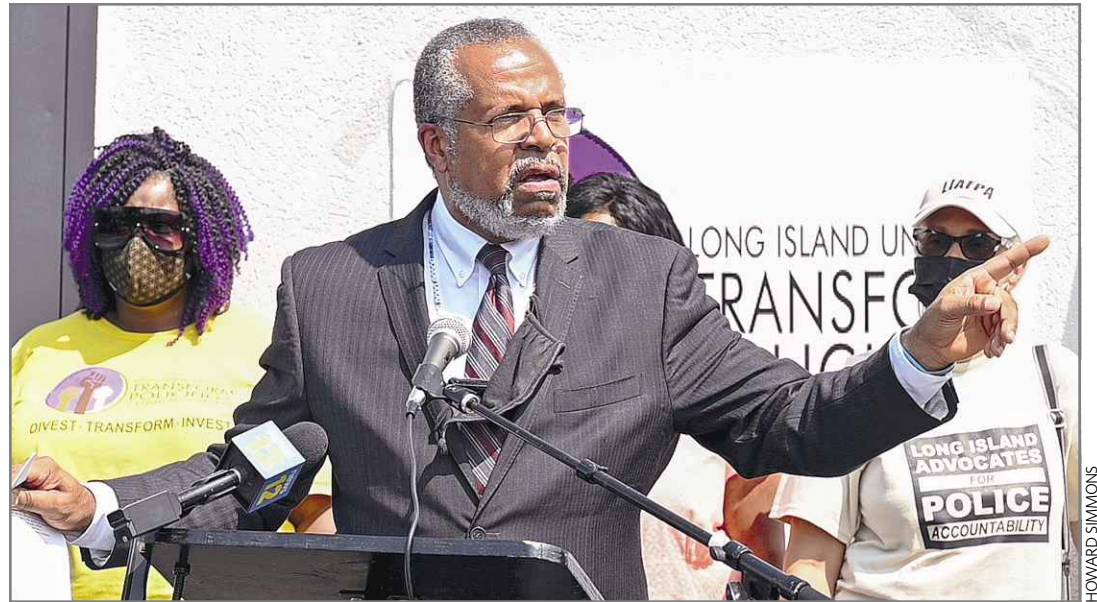
they are harassed, menaced or injured due to their status as a “first responder.”

Civil rights attorney Frederick K. Brewington contends the bill will chill free speech and is “retaliation” for last summer’s Black Lives Matter protests following the death of George Floyd.

“If you want to shut someone down, take away their livelihood,” Brewington said at a news conference outside his Hempstead office Friday. “If you want to shut someone down take away their spirit. This is intended to evoke fear in the community . . . This is payback. It’s not right. It’s not acceptable and it is against the law.”

The activists Friday directed much of their anger at Lafazan, who had previously expressed a commitment to working with BLM protesters, calling him a “fake” and a “coward.”

Tracey Edwards, Long Island regional director for the NAACP, said Lafazan has “dam-



Attorney Frederick K. Brewington speaks about changes to the Nassau Human Rights Law on Friday.

aged his reputation” and that Democrats who do not vocally object to the measure bear equal responsibility. She plans to bring NAACP members to Monday’s meeting.

A spokesman for legislative Democrats said Lafazan and DeRiggi-Whitton declined to comment.

The bill, which cleared the legislature’s Rules and Public Safety committees, would create an “irrebuttable presumption” that any harassment or injury is motivated by their status as a uniformed police officer — prohibiting those who violate the law from being able to justify their motivation.

The penalty for discriminating against a police officer would be up to \$25,000 per violation, or up to \$50,000 if the violation occurs “in the course of participating in a riot” — five times the amount citizens can seek under the county’s administrative code. The law also allows police

to seek “treble damages” or triple the allowed civil penalties.

Police Commissioner Patrick Ryder said in a prepared statement: “The protections of our first responders, residents and communities must always be a priority. The Legislature will have an opportunity to discuss and evaluate this bill on its merits.”

Shanequa Levin, co-founder of Long Island United, an advocacy group, said existing law already provides enhanced penalties for assaulting or menacing a police officer.

“The police have more protection than any other group,” Levin said. “This bill is rooted in bias. Data shows people need more protection, not the police . . . What is happening here is an example of systemic racism.”

But James McDermott, president of the Nassau Police Benevolent Association, said the bill supports officers who put their lives on the line while often fac-

ing anti-police sentiment.

“Law enforcement deserves the support of our elected officials, and deserves every possible protection to keep them safe throughout the course of their duties, and any attempt to say otherwise disrespects all who wear the badge,” he said.

David Kilmnick, president and CEO of the LGBT Network, said the bill is particularly “offensive” as county lawmakers have refused for more than a decade to add transgender individuals as a protected class.

“This bill is a slap in the face,” Kilmnick said. “It’s obscene and it trivializes the lives of tens thousands of Nassau County residents and families.”

Christine Geed, a spokeswoman for County Executive Laura Curran, said she “looks forward to hearing the public comment and discussion” about the bill and will “review any potential amendments that may be proposed by the legislature.”

Cops: Pair charged in pocketbook thefts

BY JOHN VALENTI
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Suffolk police arrested a pair of alleged pocketbook thieves Wednesday and charged them in eight separate incidents — but not before police said the two fled an attempted traffic stop, crashing their getaway car into a tree on Route 112 in Medford.

Police said Tariasha Smith, 25, of West Babylon, and Robert Hengeveld, 50, stole the handbags at a range of Suffolk supermarkets this week, beginning with a theft in Bohemia on Sun-

day and culminating with two thefts Wednesday — one in Oakdale, the second in Patchogue — before a Fifth Precinct patrol officer attempted a traffic stop on their 2015 Volkswagen Jetta on northbound Route 112 just after 10:40 a.m.

The two fled the attempted stop, and Patrol Officer Vincent Maxwell decided not to initiate a pursuit but elected to follow the getaway car at a distance, police said. However, Smith, driving “at a high rate of speed,” lost control of the car as she attempted to turn onto Peconic Avenue, crash-

ing into a tree around 10:50 a.m., police said. The two then ran away before being caught and arrested by Maxwell and Officer Dennis Stewart, police said.

Police said that in the hour before their arrests, Smith and Hengeveld snatched an unattended pocketbook from a shopping cart in the Lidl Food Market parking lot on Sunrise Highway in Oakdale as the owner was placing groceries in her car.

Then about 20 minutes later, at 10:35 a.m., they “committed a similar larceny” at the ShopRite on Sunrise Highway in

Patchogue, police said.

A description of the Jetta was then broadcast to patrol officers, leading to the attempted stop and the arrests.

Police said an investigation by Fifth Squad and Sixth Squad detectives determined the pair were responsible for the following additional pocketbook thefts:

- Sunday at Giunta’s Meat Farms, 4585 Sunrise Hwy. in Bohemia, at 2:20 p.m.;
- Monday at ShopRite, 601 Portion Rd. in Lake Ronkonkoma, at 11 a.m., 12:45 p.m. and 5:35 p.m.;

■ Tuesday at ALDI supermarket, 367 Sunrise Hwy. in Patchogue, at 5:55 p.m., and the Stop & Shop, 5701 Sunrise Hwy. in Holbrook, at 6 p.m.

Police did not detail the value of the items stolen.

Smith and Hengeveld were each charged with eight counts of fourth-degree grand larceny, three counts of fourth-degree criminal possession of stolen property, and third-degree unlawful fleeing a police officer in a motor vehicle.

The two face arraignment at a later date, police said.