

Grappling with police reform



THE COLUMN
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Sam Gonzalez, a Suffolk County legislator from Brentwood, cast the lone vote against the county's police reform plan last week.

"I was out there as the only no vote, and it was cold, it was freezing," Gonzalez, a Democrat, said in an interview. "I think a lot was done, and accomplished, but we had a chance to make history and we did not put in independent oversight."

The county's plan does include oversight of complaints about police misconduct by Suffolk's Human Rights Commission. But because the agency is part of county government infrastructure, Gonzales and other critics of the reform proposal say it amounts to the county reviewing actions by the county.

But while Gonzalez said he felt alone, one county over, in Nassau, the quest for independent review and other changes is far from over.

In Nassau, three lawmakers, all of whom represent mostly Black and Latino communities, were the lone votes against Nassau's police reform plan.

One key issue — again — was a lack of independent oversight.

No role for panel

The Nassau plan doesn't give the county's Human Rights Commission a role.

Instead, Police Commissioner Patrick Ryder and representatives for County Executive Laura Curran told lawmakers the state attorney general's



Officers at the scene of a shooting on Main Street in Port Jefferson in March. Suffolk's reform plan includes oversight of complaints.

Law Enforcement Misconduct Investigative Office, recently codified in state law, would be available for the oversight task.

That's not enough for Nassau Legis. Siela Bynoe, a Democrat from Westbury.

So, last week she fired off a letter to Attorney General Letitia James, asking James to locate one such office in Nassau. Bynoe had not heard back as of late last week.

Mike Fricchione, a spokesman for Curran, did issue a statement in response, which reads in part: "We are confident in the Attorney General's Office and believe they are in the best position to determine how to effectively deliver the oversight called for in the creation of the Law Enforcement Misconduct Investigative Office."

Independent oversight isn't the only aspect of Nassau's plan that Bynoe and other critics find lacking.

"We had recommendations on a lot of things, from making sure police officers have support they need to how to better handle re-

cruting, but there was no room for negotiation on what I felt was the simplest of things," Bynoe said in an interview.

"If nothing else, I am relentless, I am persistent and I am not giving up on those issues," she said.

Neither is a coalition of community organizations that are focused on police reform.

This week, the coalition — Long Island Advocates for Police Accountability — fired off a missive of their own to Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and leaders of the State Senate and Assembly in Albany.

They are asking that Nassau's plan be rejected outright, and that an alternative, The People's Plan, which was drafted by the community organizations, be put in place instead.

As Bynoe and other policing reform advocates await a response from the state, they also are pursuing their quest for change in police practices.

"The groups are in deep consultation about next- and long-range plans to make real police



Suffolk Legis. Sam Gonzalez

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Nassau Legis. Siela Bynoe

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reform a reality," said Frederick Brewington, a Hempstead civil rights attorney who co-signed the letter to Cuomo and other state officials.

"As we watch and listen to the trial on George Floyd's murder, we are clear that Nassau County has demonstrated that they feel they don't have to engage in the movement taking place in our nation," Brewington said.

Fricchione said the county remained open to policing reform.

"Police reform doesn't start or stop with a single document," Fricchione said in a statement. "We are always striving to build upon and enhance transparency, accountability and trust within the communities that law enforcement serves."

Body cameras crucial

For the reform plans that did pass in Nassau and Suffolk, bodycams are key.

In Suffolk, according to Jon Kaiman, a deputy county executive, the administration of County Executive Steve Bellone and its largest police union, the Police Benevolent Association, are negotiating an addition to an existing contract that would put a bodycam pro-

gram into place.

"It is going to happen," Kaiman said. "We are working toward having something, maybe in the next few weeks."

In Nassau, an agreement with the Superior Officers Association says the county and the union have to agree on a bodycam program by the end of the year. Otherwise, the provision sunsets.

In short, no agreement means no body camera program at all — although Fricchione stressed the county's confidence that a program would be put into place.

The county also is negotiating an agreement with its largest police union, the PBA, whose members recently turned down a proposed contract agreement.

Kaiman, a former head of the Nassau Interim Finance Authority, Nassau's financial control board, in the past also has negotiated police contracts in Nassau.

He said he does not expect negotiations over Suffolk's bodycam program to include a sunset clause.

"In Nassau, sunset clauses are not unusual," Kaiman said. "That's not the culture in Suffolk."