

Let's play it again, Suffolk



THE COLUMN
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The body-cam capture of Suffolk County police officers cursing and kicking a suspect pushes the issue of reform out front and center, and just in time for legislative hearings on a county police reform plan.

So just what did the body cam see?

Was it the actions of a few officers, now reassigned while awaiting disciplinary proceedings, as County Executive Steve Bellone and Commissioner Geraldine Hart said during an evening news conference last week?

Or was it a display of an old brand of Suffolk police culture, which aired so publicly,

and so shamefully, during the U.S. District Court trial of Thomas Spota, Suffolk's former district attorney?

Either way, officials acknowledged, the full 5-minute, 31-second video will change the discussion of what works, and what needs to work better, as Suffolk, and Nassau, review county police operations under a mandate from Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo.

Already the review process, in and of itself, is having impact.

Bellone's news conference, for one, marked the first time in memory that a county executive on Long Island publicly has announced that officers had been suspended without pay pending departmental disciplinary review.

Usually, such information comes to light — if it comes to light at all — during civil or criminal trials.

During Spota's 2019 trial, for example, much of the testimony revolved around the activities of James Burke, the former Suffolk chief of department, who'd pleaded guilty in 2016 to violating the civil rights of a suspect, and other officers who had been subject to departmental discipline during their careers.

Bellone's news conference also marked the first time that a department, in either county, publicly released body camera video recorded by a police officer at an arrest scene. (Nassau added body cams to DWI enforcement units in 2014 under a pilot program; Suffolk did the same in 2017.)

Bellone praised the release as evidence the county was taking necessary steps, while also being transparent.

"Once we were aware, we acted," Bellone said in an inter-

view. "The video is very disturbing."

Two officers who can be seen on video pushing or kicking Christopher Cruz — who had slammed into two police cars, and injured two officers, during a chase after stealing a vehicle, officials said — were suspended without pay pending a disciplinary review. Three other officers and a supervisor were placed on modified leave.

The office of Suffolk County District Attorney Timothy Sini also is conducting a criminal probe of the matter.

On Thursday, however, the county's assertion of transparency came under further scrutiny after Cruz' attorney, Frederick Brewington, released a video that ran far longer than the one-minute-and-change portion of the video shown to reporters last week.

In a court filing, Brewington, who has filed a notice of claim to sue Suffolk on Cruz's behalf, said officers used an ethnic slur.

Bellone and other county officials agreed the footage supports their view that body cams should be an essential part of the county police reform plan.

During his news conference, Brewington also released copies of police reports, which, he said, do not support what is shown on the video.

A portion of a report, for example, notes that Cruz had to be subdued because he was "flailing his arms," although the video shows the suspect with hands cuffed behind his back.

In addition, Brewington pointed out, the video shows that while multiple officers were on the scene, none could



SUFFOLK COUNTY EXECUTIVES OFFICE

Body camera video shows the Suffolk police arrest that led to two suspensions and modified duty for four others, officials said.

be seen stepping forward to stop Cruz from being kicked.

"The video should serve to demonstrate the importance of body camera video," Brewington said Friday, "and the limits that it has when police are engaged in wrongful behavior that they want to skew."

Robert Calarco, presiding officer of Suffolk's legislature and a member of a panel considering the county's police reform plan, said he expected the video to become part of

the discussion when the committee continues its work.

"I think it shows the value of video cameras," said Calarco (D-Patchogue).

He acknowledged, however, that the video also shows "some of things that activists have been talking to us about."

Tracey Edwards, NAACP Long Island regional director, also is on the task force that will review Suffolk's draft plan before it is submitted to the county legislature. (Other

members include ministers, police officials, lawmakers, and community and police union representatives.)

"The allegation of racial language and the viewing of suspect abuse should be a wake-up call that passing police reform that solely focuses on body cameras as the only remedy is insufficient," Edwards said Friday.

"The camera was on and the incident still took place, [and] as equally disturbing is the lack of full and complete transparency," she said.

Nassau's police plan has been submitted to the county legislature, which recently held a hearing. The Nassau legislature, along with Suffolk's, also has been asked to consider an alternative, "The People's Plan."

Suffolk has scheduled three public hearings on its draft plan — which has yet to be submitted to the legislature or task force members — on March 11 at 6 p.m., March 16 at 2 p.m. and March 18 at 6 p.m.

Video from those hearings will be livestreamed, officials said.