

Police practices go under the microscope

Coalition to review Yorktown PD policies at public meetings

BY BRIAN MARSCHHAUSER
EDITOR

Complying with Gov. Andrew Cuomo's mandate that all municipalities review their police departments and their policies, the town has assembled a nine-member community coalition to do so.

The coalition consists of community members and religious, non-profit, and business leaders: Jim Poulin, Yorktown Lions president; Rabbi Robbie Weiner, Yorktown Interfaith Coalition; Rosemarie Panio, Senior Advisory Committee chair; Peter Lanza, Yorktown Chamber of Commerce vice president; Toni Reynolds and Liz Rivera, citizen representatives; and Paul Cirilo, youth representative.

Town Supervisor Matt Slater, who selected the members from a large pool of applicants, said he was "very deliberate" in putting the coalition together.

"This coalition is incredibly diverse" in age, ethnicity and political affiliation perspective, Slater said. "I think it represents the town very, very well."

Slater and Yorktown Police Chief Robert Noble also will serve as members.

Excluding the youth representative, the coalition has four registered Democrats,

three Republicans and one unaffiliated party member. The average age of the five males and three females is 51.

The Coalition on Community Safety and Engagement, as it is officially called, is scheduled to hold an introductory meeting on Thursday, Oct. 8, when Noble will make a presentation about his department.

That introductory meeting will be followed by meetings on Oct. 20, Nov. 12 and Nov. 19 and an undetermined date in December. All meetings will be held on Zoom and will be open to the public.

"Whether you're on the task force or not, I don't think that determines anything," Slater said at the Town Board's meeting on Tuesday, Sept. 22. "Because what we're going to provide is a very engaging process that everybody and anybody can participate in."

The discussions will be confined to the Yorktown Police Department and its policies.

"It's the four walls of Yorktown," Slater said at a work session on Tuesday, Sept. 8. "That's what we're talking about. We're not talking about the national scene; we're not talking about national politics."

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People can provide written and oral testimony.

"If people had negative experiences [with the Yorktown Police Department], we want to hear it," Slater said. "If people had positive experiences, we want to hear it."

Executive Order No. 203 requires a municipal-led "comprehensive review" involving community stakeholders of a department's current policies, procedures and practices. A plan to

"improve any deficiencies" must be approved by the Town Board and submitted to the state by April 2021.

Since the governor's executive order came down on June 12, Noble and the Town Board have often repeated that Yorktown's police department is accredited by the state's Division of Criminal Justice Services—something achieved by only 29 percent of municipal police departments. Accreditation provides formal recognition that a department's policies "are conceptually sound and operationally effective."

"They're going to find no shortcomings," said Councilman Tom Diana, a retired police officer who started his law enforcement career in Yorktown.

Councilwoman Alice Roker has been equally supportive of the Yorktown Police Department and Noble.

"I'll pit my police chief against anybody, and I know I'll come out on top," she said.

In addition to providing a forum for dialogue and repairing potential deficiencies, Slater said, "I think overall it will be a great education opportunity" for the

public to learn about the police department's responsibilities and inner workings.

In an review of the department's policies, Noble said, "The data will speak well for us. De-escalation is the way we police and the numbers sort of back that up, and there's no getting away from that."

The police chief said he is ready to listen to the public, but he will not "crawl into the weeds" with people who have "an agenda."

"I don't have an issue," Noble said at the Town Board's work session on Tuesday, Sept. 8. "I don't duck anybody. I'll get up and listen to anybody who doesn't have an agenda. If it's honest and it's sincere, I'm all about trying to make that happen."

Two weeks later, he said, "We all shouldn't argue for the sake of arguing. If we're going to have a disagreement, it should be with the intent to solve a problem or a perceived problem. Let's not complicate things. Let's be open and understanding of each other's perspective, and let's get it going."

The public meetings will continue until December, when the coalition will draft a report, which would be subject to a public review in January. The feedback would be received in February and the plan ratified by the Town Board in March.

The state's Division of Budget has yet to release regulations regarding Executive Order No. 203; however, Yorktown has chosen to proceed while relying on the state's guidebook. Slater said he does not anticipate that the regulations, whenever they are handed down, will "provide any greater detail than the current guidebook does."

In addition to its seven community members, Slater has also requested participation by members of Yorktown for Justice, the Alliance for Safe Kids, the Yorktown and Lakeand school districts, Hope's Door, the Legal Aid Society of Westchester, and the Yorktown Police Benevolent Association.

"Anybody in the town of Yorktown can participate and provide feedback, which is what we're looking for," Slater said.

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SMALL NEWS IS BIG NEWS

COVID-19 Breakdown:

Village of Ossining 3,549 (179)
Yorktown 3,543 (221)
Peekskill 3,414 (140)
Cortlandt 2,993 (131)
Somers 1,642 (103)
Croton-on-Hudson 672 (35)
Town of Ossining 505 (13)
Buchanan 218 (15)

FREE

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Coat Drive in Peekskill

New York State Senator Pete Harchuk hosted a special Valentine's Day Weekend Coat Drive at Peekskill High School, collecting more than two tons of clothes (coats, jackets, sweaters, scarves, hats, gloves and mittens) for Caring for the Hungry & Homeless of Peekskill (CHHOP) and the Peekskill Hispanic Community Corporation (PHCC). The Peekskill Rotary Foundation was collecting donations at the event as well and raised more than \$750 for its Peekskill Food Initiative, which gives residents an opportunity to use food voucher cards at area restaurants.

Yorktown Coalition Releases Report on Police Review

By Rick Pezzullo

The Yorktown Coalition on Community Safety and Engagement last week released its report on the Yorktown Police Department following a five-month review.

The report was prepared in compliance with Gov. Andrew Cuomo's Executive Order requiring all local governments with police departments to perform a comprehensive review of current police force deployments, strategies, policies, procedures and practices.

After the review, local governments are required to prepare a plan to improve any deficiencies or shortfalls identified during the process by April 1.

"We were reminded that our police department already operates at one of the highest professional levels possible, as demonstrated by its longstanding status as an accredited police agency by the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, a status only 29% of New York State's 540 law enforcement agencies have achieved," Yorktown Supervisor Matt Slat-

er wrote in the report.

The nine-member Yorktown Coalition on Community Safety and Engagement arrived at its recommendations after holding six public online meetings on October 8 and 20; November 12, 19 and 24; and January 6.

The review process included two presentations by Chief Robert Noble and two listening sessions for community partners. Dozens of community members attended the six meetings. Topics raised by residents included: civilian review boards, micro-aggressions, the Yorktown Police's active engagement with residents, body cameras, implicit-bias awareness training, teen intervention programs, de-escalation strategies, lethal force reduction and police policies.

The coalition also received signed and anonymous written correspondence from the public, as well as both superintendents of the school districts that serve Yorktown. All correspondence was shared with coali-

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Peekskill Dems Select Juice Bar Owner to Fill Vacancy

Yorktown Coalition Releases Report on Police Review

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tion members and read into the record by Slater, one of its members. Town officials also encouraged members of Yorktown for Justice, a local civil justice group, to participate in all the coalition meetings, and they did.

The report's recommendations included: testing of body cameras; quarterly reports about civilian complaints; and annual anti-bias and de-escalation service training.

"The Yorktown Police Department has taken the governor's Executive Order as an opportunity to build on and further enhance the professional service we provide to Yorktown," Noble stated. "Without active and empathetic listening, we cannot

communicate effectively. When we are able to communicate effectively, we have the opportunity to improve. To make a positive difference. The Yorktown Police Department will always do our very best to listen to the needs of all and work towards safe, healthy and positive solutions."

Besides Noble and Slater, the coalition members were: Jim Poulin, President of the Yorktown Lions;

Rabbi Robbie Weiner, Yorktown Interfaith Coalition; Rosemarie Panio, Chairperson of the Senior Advisory Committee; Toni Reynolds and Liz Rivera, Citizen Representatives; Peter Lanza, Vice President of the Yorktown Chamber of Commerce; and Paul Cirilo, Youth Representative.

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term after being nominated by a district leader.

Agudelo made history as the youngest person to be elected to the council in 2017 and received a lot of publicity for her controversial stance not to recite the Pledge of Allegiance at meetings.

Agudelo, who is employed as New York Immigration Coalition's Hudson Valley Member Engagement Manager and is co-chair of the national committee for Local Progress on Reimagining our Economy, questioned the process of finding a replacement for Kollias during Thursday night's Zoom meeting.

She maintained neither she nor her Progress 4 Peekskill council seat running

mates, Amy Vele and Amy Perlow, were invited to meet with the Nominating Committee, despite the trio being part of a committee roll call vote last month. Instead, as a district leader, she was only sent an email about the special meeting.

"It could have been a more welcoming gesture if you want to bring together the Democratic Party," Agudelo remarked.

At the top of the Progress 4 Peekskill ticket for mayor is Conor Greene, co-founder and board chair of Peekskill Walks, a resident-led nonprofit advocating for safer streets and healthier neighborhoods.

It remains unclear when the Peekskill Republican Committee will announce its slate of candidates.



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