

PUBLIC SAFETY & PUBLIC INFORMATION COMMITTEE
of the
Suffolk County Legislature
Minutes

A regular meeting of the Public Safety & Public Information Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislature Building, Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York, on January 23, 2002.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Legislator Angie Carpenter - Chairperson
Legislator David Bishop - Vice-Chair
Legislator Lynne Nowick
Legislator Maxine Postal
Legislator Joseph Caracappa
Legislator William Lindsay

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Legislator Allan Binder - District #16
Paul Sabatino - Counsel to the Legislature
Tom Donovan - Aide to Presiding Officer Tonna
Terrence Pearsall - Aide to Legislator Lindsay
Ed Hogan - Aide to Legislator Nowick
Jim Spero - Deputy Director/Budget Review Office
Rosalind Gazes - Budget Analyst/Budget Review Office
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Todd Johnson - County Executive's Office
John Gallagher - Commissioner/Suffolk County Police Department
Phil Robilotto - Chief of Department/Suffolk County Police Department
Tom Muratore - Vice-President/Polie Benevolent Association
Arty Cliff - President/Superior Officer's Association
Vincent DeMarco - President/Deputy Sheriff's Benevolent Association
Michael Rothfeld - Newsday
All Other Interested Parties

MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Alison Mahoney - Court Stenographer

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(*The meeting was called to order at 9:40 A.M.*)

CHAIRPERSON CARPENTER:

I would ask that we all stand for the Pledge of Allegiance and I'll ask Legislator Lindsay to please lead us in the pledge.

Salutation

Thank you. As this is the first Public Safety Committee meeting of the new year, I would like to begin by welcoming a new member to the committee and a new member to the Legislature, Legislator Nowick, Legislator Lynne Nowick, glad to have you aboard. And I think all of the other members, including Legislator Lindsay whose name unfortunately does not appear on the agenda and I apologize, are veteran members to the committee.

Before we go to the agenda, I would just like to ask Chief Robilotto to come forward. Good morning.

(*Legislator Postal entered the meeting at 9:42 A.M.*)

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

Good morning.

CHAIRPERSON CARPENTER:

If you could just for the record give your name and title and kind of

give us an update of where we are. And if you could, I would also ask that you update the members of the committee on the conference that the department held at the college.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

Good morning. I'm Phil Robilotto, I'm the Chief of the Police Department.

In regard to the issue on the conference that we held, the County hosted a seminar held -- chaired by the Police Commissioner regarding the state of the County's readiness for any disaster that might strike. Obviously, the main focus of late has been terrorism, however, this County is overdue for a hurricane and we have been working diligently on that also. We were lucky enough to get the actual agent in charge of the entire investigation to the World Trade Center, the man's name is Pat DeMoro, he's the {ASAC} for the investigation. He came and he spoke and George came also, the agent in charge of the New York area, and he gave us an update.

In sum and substance, what they told us was the reason that there's been such a dearth of information coming forward from the Federal government is that what they are getting they are getting from other intelligence gathering agencies and the commitment that they made is secrecy, they don't want anyone killed. In fact, DeMoro himself said, "When I want a complete and total update," I believe he said it tongue in cheek, but he did say it, that he listens to CNN. The good news for this County is that we are probably, thanks to the fire services, EMS, the departments, the Sheriff's offices, in the best shape of any County in the state and very probably any County in the nation. We've got all of our plans put into place as far as our school districts are

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concerned. We have most of them automated, we have our mapping system that is actually now available. We did put our {MDC's} into the police cars and we can bring down and physically overlay schematics of schools, so we're in good condition there.

We have completed a list, which is absolutely mind boggling in its length and breadth, regarding the number of potential targets that we have in this County. It was very amazing to me, and I have lived here all my life, how many places there are where we store oil and gasoline. We're in the process of working with KeySpan and the other major carriers to secure that area and we have taken some action immediately to protect the shore front in the Village of Port Jeff which is one of our main service terminals for bringing in liquid fuel. And I would be happy to answer any questions on that.

CHAIRPERSON CARPENTER:

Are there any questions? I would just like to make one comment. Just to thank the department for being so proactive in putting that together. I was able to stop by and was impressed by the number of people who attended and the genuine -- I don't know, I guess it was the reinforcement of the idea that the public can play a very large roll, that we all need to be aware of our surroundings and what's happening. And I know that Dave Fischler, the Commissioner of Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services, also was there presenting and brought that message back, as well as Commissioner Bradley. So again, I would just like to thank the department for taking the initiative and putting it together. Were there any other issues that you wish to address?

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

There's a comment that we would like to make. Many of our pilots are military members. Considering the bill for the east end, we'd like to just add a caveat to that. Our helicopter pilots are limited in their

flight time by FAA Regulations. We currently have eight members of the Suffolk County Police pilots who are also military pilots, of that number two have been drafted -- or activated, let me phrase it that way -- two more have been notified that they are potential activees and one of them has decided to take his expertise and go into private industry. So between now and the summer months, we may be down five pilots in total. That might effect our ability to simply service the east end because there is a rather large training curve involved in flying the new helicopters.

CHAIRPERSON CARPENTER:

Do you have a number of people from the department who express interest in wanting this assignment who would like to go for that training?

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

Yes, there are people in the works. What we try to do, of course, is take new employees and if any one of them comes in with prior helicopter experience -- there is one in the current graduating class. By the way, that class will graduate on March the 1st of this year, they're already out on the road; I could comment on that too if you'd like. We let them finish out by law the required academy time and then there's what is known as on-the-job training or OTJ, they have to

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ride in the sector cars. The minimum training that we give a police officer in Suffolk is six months in the police academy and at least one month in a police car working with a field training officer. Generally speaking, by their own request, they usually stay for two months and then after that most of them are allowed to drive by themselves. If they do not make it by the third month, the State mandates that we terminate them. We do not anticipate terminating anybody out of this class.

I just pulled the records for this morning to give you an idea of the shape that we are in. We hired 152 recruits in 2000 and we hired 141 recruits in 2001. We're anticipating at least 40 retirements by the end of February, 30 have left already. We had 110 people retire in 2000 -- let me rephrase that, 110 people separated from service, that includes terminations, resignations, deaths, retirements -- and the same holds true for 2001, 118 left. That gave us a net gain of 65. So far this year, as we speak, 30 more members of the force have already retired, we're up 35 people out of that 258 we hired and there's another 10 leaving by the end of the month.

CHAIRPERSON CARPENTER:

So we're up 30.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

We're up -- from '99 to now we're up 30, and 10 more people are leaving by February. We're having some difficulty in hiring. Many of the people on the list in the band are not eligible -- let me rephrase that, have to be vetted and many of them are city police officers, so they were assigned to the World Trade Center disaster, we couldn't bring them out here to get their physicals done, to get the lie detector test taken care of, to get the psychologicals done. We are in the 92.5 band and we currently have approximate 240 active candidates. We would anticipate being able to put a class into the academy by late March.

LEG. CARACAPPA:

Question.

CHAIRPERSON CARPENTER:

Yes, Legislator Caracappa.

LEG. CARACAPPA:

Thank you. With relation to the helicopter, when you say lack of pilots or the potential for lack of pilots in the future would compromise the program, are you talking about just the seasonal program or the idea of the year long program?

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

I honestly can't answer that. I don't know how many we're going to lose; we have the potential to lose several. The commercial market obviously increased tremendously after the World Trade Center. Some of our pilots, I mean, we have some of the best around -- and excuse me for bragging but they are, they're really terrific -- and they're getting some really lucrative offers. Many of them are eligible to retire, our two senior pilots are. Based on the amount of flight time, trying to keep the two birds going at once, we keep a pilot and

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a copilot, the unit itself uses the term pilot in command. There is no regulation that says that you absolutely have to have two flight-capable people in the craft, we do that as a safety issue both for the passengers and the public. If a sufficient number of them do wind up leaving for either the military or retirement, we may wind up having to have some downtime in that 16 hours at one end of the County or the other. It's still in flux.

CHAIRPERSON CARPENTER:

Okay.

LEG. LINDSAY:

Question.

CHAIRPERSON CARPENTER:

I think Legislator Bishop was next.

LEG. LINDSAY:

Okay.

LEG. BISHOP:

I have three or four questions on different topics. Let's be -- of the 240 recruits, that's off the current list that we've hired using -- going down the bands; is that correct?

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

We've been in the bands. We didn't hire 200 -- the ones I mentioned that we already hired? The number is a little higher.

LEG. BISHOP:

The test we're hiring off of now --

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

Yeah.

LEG. BISHOP:

-- that's the test that we had a lot of trouble finely getting approval on and putting in place.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

Yeah, same test.

LEG. BISHOP:

All right. And from that test we haven't hired 240? How many have we hired?

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

Two hundred and ninety-three.

LEG. BISHOP:

Two ninety-three. And what's our minority numbers out of that?

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

In the class?

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LEG. BISHOP:

Out of the 293.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

I can't answer that off the top of my head. We have -- I believe it's 293, 283. I honestly don't know, sorry. I would take a stab at saying -- defining minority as?

LEG. BISHOP:

I would define it as Hispanic and African-American and Asian American.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

In the class?

LEG. BISHOP:

In the class.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

It would be a tough call.

LEG. BISHOP:

In the classes.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

I didn't do the dem -- I have the demographics in the office, I didn't bring them with me and I wouldn't want to make a statement to it.

LEG. BISHOP:

All right, fine. If you would --

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

It's not high. I mean, as a percentage, if it's up as high as five or seven percent.

LEG. BISHOP:

Is that -- wasn't this the -- weren't we supposed to have reformed the system to try to address that so it's another failure?

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

Actually, we didn't reform the system at all, the Federal government did it.

LEG. BISHOP:

Well, somebody reformed it.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

They insisted we take the test and that we band the list and we made every effort. The whole objective with the banding was to give us the opportunity to higher within a band.

LEG. BISHOP:

Right.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

And then they said, "No, you can't do that," so we had to do a lottery out of the band which brought it back to chance.

LEG. BISHOP:

Right. But you exhaust a full band, right?

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

You have to go through -- well, we don't --

LEG. BISHOP:

Or you could move down to the next band.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

Absolutely, you have to exhaust the whole band; you don't necessarily wind up doing that. A number of them take what they call declinations for personal reasons which is the gamet from pregnancy, school, it's just across the board.

LEG. BISHOP:

All right. The DARE Program. It's now 2002, I think the Legislature, did we pass a reprieve last year?

LEG. CARACAPPA:

The County Executive did.

LEG. BISHOP:

The DARE Program -- or we filed bills to give it a reprieve and the department chose to administratively commit to the school year.

CHAIRPERSON CARPENTER:

Yeah, commit to the school year.

LEG. BISHOP:

I guess -- I suppose now is the time we should begin discussing what the department's plans are for September. Has the department arrived at a plan, are they terminating the program; and if they are, when are they notifying the districts?

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

The Commissioner asked me to request respectfully that you table that issue until he can be here to speak. He's meeting with the new Police Commissioner of New York City today and he couldn't be here, and the Deputy has a personal issue, his wife is going in for some surgery. So they would request that you just put that off till the next meeting.

LEG. BISHOP:

Okay. Okay, you're not prepared to answer, I understand.

I was at a joint civics meeting of Lindenhurst which means all the civic associations in the Village of Lindenhurst, and the precinct sent down some officers, which I appreciate. And an elderly lady raised her hand and said it took her a half hour, her and her neighbor, to reach 911, that nobody picked up. Then other people joined in saying they had similar problems and then the officer from the precinct said, "Yeah, I have trouble reaching 911 myself." At that point, you know, I needed a crash helmet as the civic members became agitated. Is that our information administratively, do we -- is there a problem with the 911 system after all the millions of dollars

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that we have been spending in recent years to upgrade it; that the most basic function is not occurring?

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

There is no problem whatsoever with the 911 system, the problem is with the Emergency Complaint Operators. We have been hiring them as far as we can; and again, it's a Civil Service position and it's a

list. There are two separate lists, one is ECO Spanish Speaking and the other is a regular ECO. As an example, we just hired five, four of them quit, now that has to start the whole vetting process all over again. There are a number of them who are out on long-term illness in keeping with the contracts and we are trying desperately to bring more of them in. We currently have SCINS for 20 positions, Emergency Complaint Operators, but just getting them through the process takes quite a while. It's also a long training curve, several weeks.

LEG. BISHOP:

In the -- I'm sorry you have to take the heat for this .

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

No heat; I mean, it's a fact.

LEG. BISHOP:

In the meantime, certainly the public's interaction with the system shouldn't be compromised. Whatever it takes administratively, whether it's the Police Commissioner or FRES, whoever runs that system, themselves sitting in there, it shouldn't take a half hour for somebody to get through to 911, even if we're -- no matter what's going on in terms of SCIN forms and hirings.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

I haven't looked but I would sincerely doubt it took a half hour to get through. I mean, I'll check that definitely when I go back. The machine itself, the system itself times the call.

LEG. BISHOP:

Right.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

Many times when they tell you it takes a half hour, they get the message to hold on --

LEG. BISHOP:

Right.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

-- and then they hang up and it brings them back to the bottom of the { kil} .

LEG. BISHOP:

Well, what is the goal of the system? Shouldn't it be that somebody dials 911 and within 60 seconds information is conveyed, received and responded to?

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

Absolutely.

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LEG. BISHOP:

Okay. And that's not occurring right now.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

No. As I said, I haven't checked this month. We have never been down to that level ever.

LEG. BISHOP:

What should we as the Public Safety Committee be doing to ensure that problem --

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

I will get back to you with exactly -- with the facts of the case. And in fairness to the government, if you will, we have the positions,

we just can't get the people. We are putting people in there, we're paying overtime, many of them are just burning out.

LEG. BISHOP:

This is not a position that you could use people from other parts of public safety to fill in until we hire -- in other words, how about officers who have been pulled off the street because of injury; could they operate in the 911 system? Is it a police function?

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

No, it's a civilian function.

LEG. BISHOP:

But it's managed by the Police Department.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

It's our function, yes.

LEG. BISHOP:

It's yours, okay. I just -- I'm sure everybody agrees and I'm sure you agree, it's just not --

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

Absolutely.

LEG. BISHOP:

It can't -- there's no excuse that's sufficient because some way, somehow there has to be bodies, you know, at the other end of the phone when people are calling with a 911 emergency, particularly when we're raising taxes, police taxes --

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

We do not --

LEG. BISHOP:

-- and all the other expenses.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

Again, I didn't look at it, I'll check it, I'll get back to you personally and the committee at large, but a half hour is not -- it didn't happen.

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CHAIRPERSON CARPENTER:

Legislator Bishop, may I interrupt for a moment? I would just ask -- the Commissioner will be here at the next meeting.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

Yes.

CHAIRPERSON CARPENTER:

In addition to giving us the status of where they are with the DARE Program, also I would ask for an update on the 911, the emergency calls. But I have a question. If you hired five people and four quit, was any follow-up done as to why? Is it the hour, what is the reason that 80% of the people that got hired chose not to take the position? Is that kind of following --

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

We actually do an interview, they fill out a sheet as to the reason for they're leaving. Generally speaking, they didn't realize how hectic the job actually is and they didn't realize that they actually have to work swing shifts and hours, although there are fixed shifts available in there but it's a seniority issue. We're looking at revamping the way they work, it's just a very difficult place to get

people to want to come in and work from the midnight time on forward. Additionally, there is a curve. I was a Commanding Officer of that unit for years. There is a work load curve that occurs and there's a bubble, if you will, that punches in, generally speaking, during the midday from about -- or the midevening period from about four o'clock on to maybe 10, 10:30 at night, then the work load considerably drops, but that's true throughout.

The Deputy just tells me it's only a Grade 13 for the Emergency Complaint Operators and it's Grade 15 for the Public Safety Dispatchers, that could also be something that might need to be addressed.

CHAIRPERSON CARPENTER:

So if you could come back to us with that kind of information, if you feel that the grade needs to be --

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

We'll have it next week or --

CHAIRPERSON CARPENTER:

Okay, the next meeting.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

That's two weeks, next meeting.

CHAIRPERSON CARPENTER:

Legislator Bishop, did you have any other questions?

LEG. BISHOP:

No, that's it.

CHAIRPERSON CARPENTER:

Legislator Lindsay?

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Yeah. Chief, I just had some questions on the helicopter. Again, the worst case scenario that you envision and we wind up with only five pilots --

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

No, no, we would have more than five pilots, five would leave.

LEG. LINDSAY:

Okay.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

They're in the military. It's cheap training for us so we --

LEG. LINDSAY:

Okay. We only have eight now?

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

No. All total?

LEG. LINDSAY:

Yeah.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

We have 19 Police Officer Pilots assigned to the Aviation Section; seven are in the military, two are activated and two have been served with get-prepared-to-leave notices.

LEG. LINDSAY:

Okay. How many live bodies do we have now?

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:
Nineteen.

LEG. LINDSAY:
Okay, but some of them are in the military.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:
Two of them are currently in active duty status.

LEG. LINDSAY:
Okay, so that brings us down to 17.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:
Two more have been notified that they may be drafted.

LEG. LINDSAY:
Okay.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:
Two of them have come in and said to us that they're considering job offers in the private community.

LEG. LINDSAY:
Okay. So if those hypotheticals come about, we're down to 13 pilots.

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CHIEF ROBILOTTO:
Yes.

LEG. LINDSAY:
Okay.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:
There's one potential, one qualified pilot is in the recruit class, but by State law we can't use him. It's not fair to the man, he's got to be able to get certified as a Police Officer first, then we can take him into the system.

LEG. LINDSAY:
My question is can we maintain the service that we're providing now with our three helicopters with 13 pilots?

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:
The question has to be answered -- and I have to beg the question, it depends on the flight time; the more time they put in the air, the less time they're allowed to fly.

LEG. LINDSAY:
It depends on the amount of calls they get.

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:
Of calls, yes. We believe we'll be able to do it.

LEG. LINDSAY:
Would there be a point in time that we would consider only putting only one pilot in a helicopter?

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:
If it comes down to that, certainly. Speaking of --

LEG. LINDSAY:
Do we have any provisions to recruit just a pilot?

CHIEF ROBILOTTO:

We tried that years ago, Police Helicopter Pilot, we asked for a Civil Service test, it really didn't pan out for us. We found it's easier to actually take them on and train them. As an example, we have three supervisors who are certified pilots and we have had a number of pilots who have actually, by FAA rules, aged-out or physical condition drops them out of it. One of our best pilots, one of our instructor pilots wound with a heart condition and he couldn't fly anymore; it's not the department that does it, it's the Federal Aviation Rules.

LEG. LINDSAY:

It just -- so in other words, there's a successive amount of hurdles in order for us to recruit a pilot. They have to be on the police test, they have to past the test, they have to be accepted in the next class and then, of course, they'd have to have some qualifications as a helicopter pilot.