

Opinion: Proposed police oversight system deserves City Council's support

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- Portland voters overwhelmingly passed Measure 26-217 to create a new police oversight system. A proposal building out the framework of the new system goes before the Portland City Council this week.

By

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After almost two years and thousands of hours of volunteer effort, Portland's Police Accountability Commission last month released its final proposal for a new community-led police oversight system. In accordance with voters' direction, a 20-member volunteer committee has researched, debated and crafted a framework for providing civilian oversight of our policing system to improve accountability and restore trust in our police force.

As the president of an organization that supported the ballot measure behind this transition and as a police reform advocate who has closely monitored the commission's progress, we can say the outcome was worth waiting for – and is worth supporting now. The Portland City Council, which will consider the commission's recommendations this Thursday, should support this proposal and help ensure its implementation as soon as possible.

City councilors appointed the members of the Police Accountability Commission in 2021, nine months after Portland voters approved Measure 26-217 with 82% of the vote. The transformative measure added a new section to the City Charter authorizing the creation of an independent board to investigate complaints against police and their supervisors. In addition, the initiative called for the board to examine all deaths in custody, uses of deadly force, force that results in injury and violations

of constitutional rights. Importantly, the measure specifically called for giving the new oversight board the ability to compel testimony, issue subpoenas and impose discipline – a significant enhancement to the current system’s authority.

The commission’s job was to fill in the details of how the new oversight system and board will operate.

The volunteers researched best practices. They examined the oversight systems of other cities including San Diego, San Francisco, Oakland, Seattle, Chicago and New York City, and reviewed reports by the National Association for Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement and the U.S. Department of Justice. The proposal incorporates policies from some of those jurisdictions, including how to size the board so it is large enough to reflect the city’s diversity and handle the complaint processing workload. It also works to remove barriers to participation by modestly compensating board members.

Furthermore, it provides complaint navigators to assist people through the process and suggests conducting root cause analyses of undesirable police-related events in order to prevent future occurrences. To ensure the new office’s work is fully transparent to the public, the proposal requires annual reporting on 20 different data points such as how the city is progressing on the board’s policy recommendations as well as the number, nature and settlement amounts of civil suits against Portland Police officers.

The commission also engaged the public through a robust and deliberative process, meeting with police officers, business community representatives, racial justice advocacy groups, culturally specific groups and many others with interests in the police accountability system. In total, the commission held 23 community engagement events across all parts of the city and held 124 public meetings where they solicited public testimony. And they collaborated with their peers, discussing such issues as how best to support and train board members and promote public participation in board meetings before finalizing their proposal. Notably, the commission unanimously approved submitting the draft code and report to city council for their consideration.

Community members interested in learning details of the proposal can attend the League of Women Voters’ online community education event on the evening of Oct. 11, to hear from Police Accountability Commission members. Check lwvpdx.org, for specifics.

The League of Women Voters of Portland began studying policing in Portland in the 1960s and has been engaged in issues related to law enforcement and police oversight since that time. In the ensuing decades, the League has had a role in the creation, advocacy and monitoring of effective civilian oversight of police. Based on League study and policy positions, we endorsed Ballot Measure 26-217 in November 2020, joining the vast majority of Portland voters in supporting the reforms outlined in the charter amendment. As it has for many decades now, the League will continue to monitor and encourage the city’s support of effective civilian oversight of the police.

We urge City Council to follow the will of the voters, honor the commission’s careful research and deliberative process and offer its support for the proposal when it comes before them this week.