

OPINION

LETTERS POLICY

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OUR VIEW

Right idea, but it's the wrong time on police commission proposal

Rockford Mayor Larry Morrissey should not try to end one controversy by starting another.

His proposal to give the mayor and City Council power to hire, fire and discipline the city's police and fire chiefs has merit, but should not be used as an excuse to circumvent hearings into the actions of Police Chief Chet Epperson.

The Fire and Police Commission, at the insistence of the police union, is conducting a probable-cause hearing into Epperson's actions during an October 2013 incident at the home of then-NAACP Rockford President Lloyd Johnston.

Serious accusations of falsifying reports have been thrown around. We don't blame Morrissey for wanting to stop a process that makes the chief he has steadfastly supported throughout his tenure look bad.

"It hurts me to see the chief go through what he's gone through because he hasn't done a thing I haven't asked him to do," Morrissey said. "If I wanted him to resign, he would have resigned a long time ago."

Morrissey is concerned that the ugly hearing will erode the public trust in the Police Department. Yet nothing erodes the public's trust faster than trying to bypass a system that has existed in Rockford for decades.

The mayor's credibility already has taken a hit by making this proposal at such a sensitive time. He could minimize the damage by withdrawing the idea and waiting until the Epperson proceedings finish.

If aldermen go along with the mayor and vote to change the system they would look suspect as well. The public would wonder what was being covered up. What other accusations could be brought to light that would embarrass the chief and, by extension, the mayor?

The public knows the police union has had a problem with Epperson almost since the day he was appointed. The reasons for the union's dislike of the chief have been vague, but

are now being brought to light.

The proceedings have been an embarrassment for Rockford, but ending them now would be more embarrassing. The police union most likely would file suit, which would probably add up to more legal fees than are being spent on the hearing. Taxpayers are on the hook for those legal fees, by the way.

There has been at least one other attempt to shift power from the Fire and Police Commission to the City Council. That effort failed in 1943 and there has been no serious attempt to shift authority until now.

The idea of having more of a direct line of accountability between voters and the police chief is worth exploring. The Winnebago County sheriff, for example, is accountable directly to voters. Rockford's police chief has a couple of layers between him and voters.

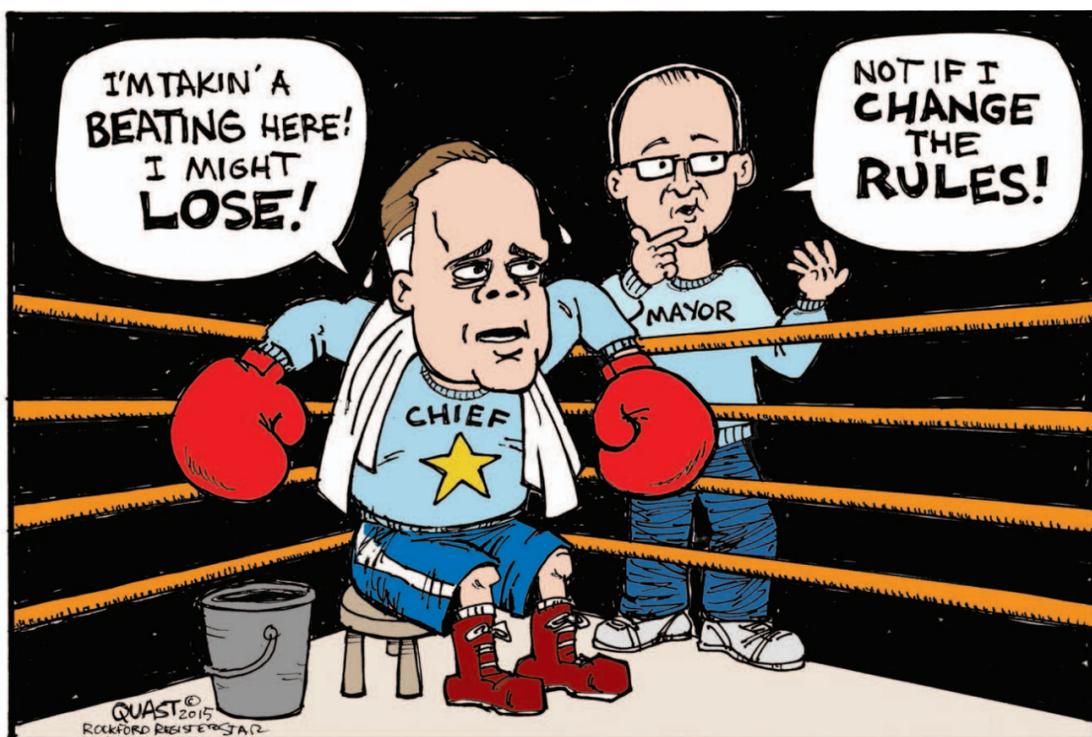
The Fire and Police Commission, whose members are appointed by the mayor, was created to put a buffer between politics and public safety. However, ultimately it's the mayor and aldermen who get credit or blame for just about every issue, so we might as well eliminate the middle step. The mayor says the chief has done everything he has asked him to do, so direct accountability may as well be official.

But this is not the time to do that. The proposal should be set aside for six months, and a small committee of aldermen should be assigned to study the issue, look at best practices and come back with a proposal that can be robustly debated. Current personnel and personalities should not factor into it.

Aldermen could vote on the proposal when they meet Tuesday. If the majority agree with the mayor, then Epperson's disciplinary hearing scheduled for Thursday will be dismissed.

That would make matters worse with an already unhappy union and a skeptical public. Let the commissioners do their job, and let's study what their role should be in the future after this current controversy ends.

BRUCE QUAST



ANNIVERSARY OF ATTACK AT NIU

Stereotypes about school shooters are dangerous

School shooters are misfits and loners — bullied kids who skulk down the sides of hallways being taunted by their fellow students. Right? No, not usually. Yet widespread assumptions prevail that the typical campus shooter fits that profile. And that's dangerous. As long as we believe that students are not dangerous if they are popular or play sports or are too small to hurt anyone — even if they exhibit warning signs of potential violence — we'll continue to put our communities at risk.

Steven Kazmierczak, who went on a shooting rampage at Northern Illinois University on Valentine's Day 2008, is an example of a school shooter who did not fit the stereotype. First, he was not a kid, but 27 years old. Second, he was neither friendless nor a misfit. In fact, he was "the golden boy" of the sociology department at NIU, praised by his professors not only for his intelligence, but also for his social skills and affability. Yet he killed five people and injured 17 before killing himself.

Similarly, Charles Whitman was a charismatic ex-marine who was married and well-liked by his peers.



PETER LANGMAN

Then in 1966, he became the infamous "Texas Tower" sniper when he fatally shot 16 people and injured 32 at the University of Texas in Austin. And last fall, when Jaylen Fryberg shot five of his friends, killing four, it happened only a week after he was named Homecoming Prince at a Washington state high school. Reporters wrote that "he didn't fit the profile."

In truth, there is no profile — no one-size-fits-all description. Instead, there are warning signs based on the talk and actions of potential shooters.

Why does it matter that there is no profile? Because if we want to stop potential shooters before they show up at school with a gun, we need accurate information, not misleading stereotypes. If we think we know what school shooters look like, we may miss the warning signs.

Our response to those warning signs needs to be the same regardless of the person's race, ethnicity or

gender, regardless of whether the person is on the football team or a marginalized youth, a gifted student or in special education, popular or picked on.

There are many warning signs, partly because shooters tend to leak their plans to other people. They may talk about how fun it would be to commit a school shooting. Even if they present this as a joke, it may be their way of "testing the waters" to see how their friends respond. Sometimes, potential shooters try to recruit a friend to join them or warn their friends to stay away from school on a certain day.

Potential attackers might gather guns and ammunition or practice creating homemade explosives. They might study other school shootings. Some have been so obsessed with particular attacks that they have made pilgrimages to the schools where the rampages occurred and ordered guns from the same places that their "idols" purchased theirs.

Of course, not all shooters clearly communicate their intentions. Kazmierczak did not directly reveal his intentions to kill. But there were signals of what might be coming. His friends called him "Psycho" and "Strange Steve." They knew he was

obsessed with Adolf Hitler, Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer and fascinated by the attacks at Columbine and Virginia Tech.

So students must be trained to report warning signs of potential violence. All too often, students have seen warning signs and said nothing. More positively, most thwarted rampages have been due to students reporting their concerns.

In addition, school personnel must be prepared to recognize warning signs of potential violence so they know when to alert others who are trained in assessing whether a person presents a threat. Faculty, counselors, cafeteria staff and custodians — all need to be part of violence prevention.

We might not be able to prevent all school attacks this way, but we can prevent many more of them by paying attention and intervening.

—Dr. Peter Langman is a psychologist and author of the recently published book, *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators*. He maintains thousands of pages of documents online relating to school shooters at schoolshooters.info.

MY VIEW

Immigrants part of a brighter future

The question of what our country's policy should be concerning immigration is a controversial topic in Washington. Without delving into the details, I believe it is important that Rockfordians understand this debate's local implications.

Immigrants have been a part of the Rockford population almost from the city's beginning. In fact, only four years after its founding, immigrants began arriving in Rockford. By the turn of the 20th century, 40 percent of Rockford's population was foreign-born. Today, immigration's impact can be seen in our public schools, where educators must contend with more than 40 different languages that are spoken by



DAVID BYRNES

their students.

Immigrants have gone on to have a tremendous impact on our community. They have founded companies as well as important social and medical institutions. Immigrants have also become our city's political leaders and created local landmarks.

At the same time, new arrivals to our society usually do not feel welcome. The assimilation experience, which is documented in Midway Village

Museum's exhibit "Many Faces, One Community," is one of perseverance against adversity. This experience often lasts more than one generation.

Midway Village Museum is holding a symposium on "Immigration: Crisis or Opportunity?" at the Museum Center on Feb. 28. The event includes lunch, so it is suggested that people make reservations. Sponsored by the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois, we have invited two national experts, Neil Foley of Southern Methodist University and Matthew Garcia of Arizona State University, to attend and present their latest research. In addition, a panel of local experts will relate what they hear to our Rockford situation. These experts include

Paul Logli of the United Way, Amy Heilman of the refugee program at Rock Valley College, Pat Winn of Catholic Charities and Sara Dady of the law firm Dady & Hoffmann. They will be able to speak to the state of immigration here in Rockford.

How can our community best work with new immigrants for the benefit of the entire city? The Rockford community needs to have this discussion, from meeting their immediate needs to how immigrants can become productive citizens who help us achieve a brighter future. I invite everyone to become a part of that discussion. To learn more, please visit midwayvillage.com.

—David J. Byrnes, president, Midway Village Museum, Rockford

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