

Senate passes police reform bills

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The Senate voted to rework the makeup of police and fire commissions in the state's two largest cities and changed reporting requirements for use-of-force incidents as part of a package to overhaul law enforcement policies in Wisconsin.

The bill reworking police and fire commission policies was first introduced in 2017. The other bills were in response to the death of George Floyd last year in Minneapolis.

SB 117 would require the commissions in Milwaukee and Madison to include at least one member picked from a list recommended by each union representing firefighters and police officers.

It also calls for requiring at least one person on a three-member panel conducting a trial of a police officer to have professional law enforcement experience unless no members with that background would be available.

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Some Dems decried the bill, saying it creates an imbalance of power and will inflame tensions between residents of color and the police department. Sen. LaTonya Johnson, D-Milwaukee, said that's because the bill would give law enforcement an overly prominent role on a citizen-driven board in deciding discipline against officers.

Dems argued that was particularly problematic because Republicans eight years ago ended the requirement that police officers and firefighters live in the communities they serve, meaning they aren't representing the interests of citizens.

"When Sherman Park was set ablaze, that was in my district," Johnson said, referring to violent protests that erupted in 2016 following a police shooting of a Black man. "So I know how fragile these relationships are. I know that this bill does

not improve those relationships. It makes it worse.”

Sen. Lena Taylor, one of the co-sponsors of the bill, lost a challenge to Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett a year ago, and Johnson suggested that was one of the reasons her fellow Dem was a co-sponsor of the bill along with GOP colleagues.

Taylor fired back that had nothing to do with her motivations in supporting the bill, though she criticized Barrett at length for what she said were his failings with the commission. That includes failing to appoint a seventh member of the commission. Now at six members, it has deadlocked on hiring a new police chief

Taylor lost to Barrett by more than 25 points.

“I understand the issue. This issue is the fire and police commission, not about any of you, not about me, not about the executive,” Taylor said.

The bill passed 22-11 with Taylor the only Dem supporting it.

The bill would make other changes to the commissions in Milwaukee and Madison. For example, the Milwaukee commission would go to nine members rather than seven now.

It also would add new requirements when the commissions appoint a new fire or police chief. That includes a requirement that the commission meets with unions representing employees who would serve under the new chief.

The legislation also would make changes to appeals of disciplinary actions, allowing officers and firefighters to introduce additional evidence in court as they challenge those penalties if the judge finds the information new or relevant.

The other bills the Senate approved included:

*SB 122, which would require law enforcement agencies to post on the Internet their policies regarding use of force. If changed, the updated policy must be posted as soon as practically possible, but within a year.

*SB 123, which would add new reporting requirements on use-of-force incidents. Under the bill, law enforcement agencies would have to report to the state Department of Justice information on the discharge of a firearm involving police and a civilian, as well as actions taken by law enforcement in response to an act of

resistance that results in great bodily harm or death.

That includes gender, race, ethnicity, age and other details about the incident.

*SB 124, which creates a grant program to fund community-oriented policing programs in cities with a population of 30,000 or more. The bill was amended to remove the \$600,000 in funding for fiscal year 2020-21. The office of Sen. Van Wangaard, R-Racine and one of the co-sponsors, said the funding will be addressed in the state budget.

*SB 165, which would expand the responsibilities of the Law Enforcement Standards Board, which regulates the training of law enforcement officers. The board would be charged with regulating jail and juvenile detention officer training standards and to regulate recruitment standards for new law enforcement, jail, and juvenile detention officers.

SB 122 and 165 passed on a voice vote, while the other two cleared with unanimous roll call votes.