



Local news

Civilian oversight bill nears passage

by **Rebecca Rivas**

April 15, 2015



St. Louis is one step closer to establishing a board of seven city residents who have the power to

review complaints and investigate police misconduct.

City aldermen voted on Wednesday, April 15, to finalize the language of Board Bill 208, which authorizes a civilian oversight board for the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department.

On April 20, aldermen will cast their final votes on the bill. However, supporters of the legislation – who packed into the aldermanic chamber gallery Wednesday – have already started celebrating. The bill needs 15 votes to pass on Monday, and it has 16 aldermanic co-sponsors.

Longtime advocate for police reform Jamala Rogers said she was overwhelmed when the aldermen easily approved the bill’s language through a “voice vote.” Only about four aldermen – including Aldermen Joe Vaccaro (Ward 23) and Ken Ortmann (Ward 9) – voiced a “nay” vote, when aldermen were asked, “All those in favor?”

“I was almost moved to tears, even though I know there is a hard road ahead of us,” said Rogers, co-founder of the Coalition Against Police Crimes & Repression (CAPCR.)

The coalition has been working on a civilian oversight bill since 1983 when Marilyn Banks, a young mother and innocent bystander, was killed by a St. Louis police officer.

Alderman Terry Kennedy of Ward 18 said he was very pleased that so many voted to move the bill forward. In 2006, Kennedy championed a bill for a civilian oversight board that passed the Board of Aldermen but was vetoed by Mayor Francis Slay.

“I think that shows a larger support for it than what we even thought,” he said.

According to the board rules, Kennedy said, aldermen cast a voice vote when voting to “perfect” a bill – meaning no more amendments or language changes can be made. The legislation’s “third reading and final passage” on Monday, April 20 will require a “roll call,” where each present alderman will vote in favor or against.

Both Rogers and Kennedy said they were confident the bill will pass.

The bill’s sponsor, Alderman Antonio French (Ward 21), said the bill is a step in the right direction.

“It’s not perfect,” he said. “It does not have the authority and the power that a lot of people wanted to see.”

However, French said, “It will provide an extra set of eyes to oversee complaints against police,” and police will now longer be left to “police themselves.”

French said it still does not satisfy the St. Louis Police Officers’ Association – which sent out a letter to aldermen on Tuesday night encouraging them to vote against the bill.

The bill authorizes the oversight board to review citizen complaints, as well as Internal Affairs investigations. The board would have the power to send investigations back to Internal Affairs with recommendations for further questions or additional evidence. If the board is still unsatisfied, it can conduct its own independent investigation and make recommendations to the police chief regarding discipline.

The board’s ability to conduct its own investigations got the most pushback from the police union. However, the bill does not include subpoena power for the civilian board, which Ferguson protestors demanded. French pushed for the subpoena power, but Mayor Slay and the police union pushed back.

“It’s not as strong as some civilian review boards are in some cities,” French said. “It has teeth to do some things, but not everything we wanted to see.”

John Chasnoff, a co-founder of CAPCR, said after the bill passes, the group is asking aldermen to “turn their sights” toward two companion bills next session. The first would put subpoena power on the ballot, giving citizens their say on the issue.

The second bill would create a department of civilian oversight, which would give the board greater independence and grant the board greater say over its budget, Chasnoff said.

CAPCR will also be leading a campaign to seek out and recommend board candidates to the aldermen, he said. The bill allows the mayor to nominate seven members of the board by choosing from the aldermen’s recommendations. The aldermen have authority to confirm or reject those nominations. A public hearing on the nominations is required.

“We need to make sure this is an effective board, that it has the powers and membership that it needs,”

Chasnoff said. “The journey is not complete.”

Follow this reporter on Twitter [@rebeccarivas](#).

