

October 28, 2020: Local News — Take the city's property tax survey; new roundabouts coming to PT

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Lily Haight with local news for October 28th, 2020.

The city council's ad hoc committee on law enforcement and public safety voted at their meeting on October 26th to try and extend their current working plan to January of 2021 at minimum, which, if approved at a regular city council meeting, will allow the committee to continue their work into 2021.

The committee, which was formed in response to nationwide protests over police brutality and racial injustice, has two more scheduled meetings left this year, one in November and one in December.

A robust discussion about policy is needed, said mayor Michelle Sandoval, but she added that it's going to take more time than the two meetings that are left in the year.

At the meeting on October 26th, committee members heard presentations about the Community Health Improvement Plan. They also heard from Interim Police Chief Troy Surber about the current police manual and training system.

Surber gave a presentation on the benefits of contracting with Lexipol, a private, for-profit company that helps local law enforcement agencies draft their policy manuals.

Lexipol has recently come under scrutiny, however, for policies that aim to protect law enforcement agencies from lawsuits, rather than reforming police departments on use of force or de-escalation tactics.

The company was founded in 2003 by two former law enforcement officers who later became attorneys, named Bruce Praet and Gordon Graham. Praet previously worked as an attorney for the Los Angeles police union and the Orange city attorney's office, where he handled police litigation.

According to an article published by Bloomberg, Lexipol advertises itself as a time-saver for police departments across the country. Departments can outsource the job of drafting and adapting their own policies to Lexipol, which pledges to protect agencies from lawsuits by keeping them up to date with the latest court decisions and legislation. Despite this, Bloomberg reported that countless police departments that subscribe to the company have been sued by the American Civil Liberties Union. The company's terms and conditions specify that Lexipol is not liable for its policies, leaving its clients responsible if the policies are challenged in court.

Reporting from The Intercept has shown that Lexipol has regularly opposed de-escalation policies, the regulation of use of force, and growing calls to forbid police from shooting into moving vehicles. Intercept reporter Alice Speri found that in 2019, after the police killing of Eric Logan in South Bend, Indiana, it turned out that the officer who killed Logan had been wearing a body camera, but that the camera was off. Lexipol wrote South Bend's police manual, for the price of \$95,000. The manual mandated officers wear body cameras, but it didn't specify that the cameras had to be turned on.

More than 8,100 public safety agencies use Lexipol nationwide, including Port Townsend's police department, which transitioned from an internally developed policy manual to using Lexipol in 2013.

The total cost of continuing to use Lexipol in 2021 would be \$16,667. Transitioning to self-maintaining our training and policy manual would cost an estimated \$154,815.

Surber pointed out some of the criticism of Lexipol, but argued that Lexipol offers uniform and consistent policy and that every policy update can be amended or corrected to be specific to our own police agency.

Port Townsend's policy, Surber said, bans the use of any chokehold or stranglehold, unless deadly force is necessary. The Port Townsend policy also discourages firing at or from a moving vehicle unless absolutely necessary. The policy requires warning before discharging a firearm, where feasible. Surber also noted that the police department has not had a use of deadly force incident since 1995.

Committee members at the meeting on October 26th asked detailed questions about the use of force policy and the training that officers go through.

Mayor Michelle Sandoval expressed her own concerns about Lexipol. While she agreed not getting sued is a good thing, she said she didn't know if that goal was the main mission for the health and safety of our community.

Surber said that Port Townsend's crisis intervention training runs in tandem with the Lexipol policy model. He noted the Crisis Intervention Training program substantially exceeds state requirements, focusing on verbal and physical de-escalation and responding to mental health, rage/aggression, and substance abuse related incidents.

The committee will continue its discussion on policing at a meeting on November 30th. In addition, the city is entering in a process for hiring a new police chief. According to city manager John Mauro, they hope to make an offer on a candidate by the end of the year.

And that's it for today's local news. KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon Monday through Saturday and at five PM Monday through Thursday. You can contact us through news@kptz.org. I'm Lily Haight. Thanks for listening.