

Press Clippings 09-25-20

---The Courier-News--- 09/25/2020

Council vote to renew contract that puts cops in Elgin schools leads to intense discussion on race

By: Gloria Casas

The Elgin City Council held off on renewing a contract that puts Elgin police officers into city schools after the topic triggered a heated discussion about race between two council members.

The council had been set to vote on a \$500,000 contract to continue having school resource officers in seven **District U-46** schools in Elgin: Abbott, Ellis, Kimball and Larsen middle schools and Elgin, Larkin, and Gifford Street high schools.

It's a program that's been in place for 33 years, was initiated by the school district and has helped resolve conflicts, thwart gang recruitment efforts, and deter violent and criminal incidents, City Manager Rick Kozal said. The school district pays \$600,000 as its share of service's cost.

Councilman Tish Powell asked for the vote delay, asking police Chief Ana Lalley to provide information about the type of incidents occurring at Elgin schools, criminal charges filed against students, and the age, race and sex of students being arrested.

Her concern, she said, is school district data shows a disproportionate number of arrests involving students of color, which she called troubling.

U-46 officials want to move forward with the contract, but the ultimate decision is made by the council, Powell said.

"There's nothing that says we as a community have to participate in it," she said. "If the school district is indeed making bad decisions, we don't have to be a part of that."



Elgin City Councilwoman Tish Powell (Tish Powell / handout)

Matt Thomas, speaking during the public comment portion of the meeting, urged the council to reject the contract. The presence of a school resource officer means students can be subject to arrest, "making the transition from school to prison much too easy," he said.

"These arrests and interactions with officers can have lasting, negative effects on children. Some of these children begin to believe a criminal is all they will ever be," he said.

According to U-46 data for the 2019-20 school year, **6% of students are Black but they account for more than 50% of the arrests made**, Thomas said.

Councilman Toby Shaw, who once questioned why the city paid to have officers in schools, said he thinks the program has been successful and he'd like to see it continue.

“This program was put in place to reduce the number of reactive situations that we are put in and to be proactive and have a presence in the schools. ... The impact of this program is undeniable,” Shaw said. “So now talking about it today, it’s interesting the light this is coming up under.

“Racist. Racist institution. Systematic racism. Systems of oppression. Those things do not describe the Elgin Police Department,” Shaw said, referring to public comments being made. “I am sorry, they do not. They do not describe this program in any way, shape or form. I’ve heard this for weeks. I guess you just tipped me over tonight. I’ve had enough.”



Elgin City Councilman Toby Shaw (Toby Shaw / handout)

“I’ve had to hold my tongue for weeks,” said Shaw, who heads the police reform task force with Powell. “If we go around saying everyone is a racist when they are not, that’s a huge problem. If you ever want this community to move forward and bring people together, those are the most divisive words to use.”

Powell said Shaw was missing the point of wanting more information before voting on the contract.

“No one is calling the (school resource officers) racists,” Powell said. “What I am pointing out is the disproportionate data showing children of color being arrested and charged with serious crimes in our schools. This is not just an Elgin problem, this is nationwide.

“With all due respect, as a white man in America who doesn’t have black children, you have a very different view and a very different experience in this country,” she said. “I am the only person sitting up here who is the parent of a Black son who goes to school in U-46. ... These are legitimate concerns that I feel we need to discuss.

At one point, Powell said, “Yes, you’re fired up. I’ve been fired up. Bring it. I’m ready.”

Councilman John Steffen said the conversation should continue when the council has more information. “Let’s see what the data shows,” he said.

Shaw cast the only vote against tabling the contract vote.