

Police academy proposals draw heat at public hearing

By Uriel J. Garcia

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The board that oversees the New Mexico Law Enforcement Academy is facing criticism over two proposed changes that could limit the public's access to police training materials and prevent residents from raising concerns about police tactics at board meetings.

One of the proposals would strike a rule that says the academy director has to post lesson plans on a website for the public to review. The second proposal would allow the board chairman or the academy director to deny a request from the public to place a topic for discussion on a board meeting agenda. "That decision will be final," the measure says.

Chris Mechels, a retired Los Alamos National Laboratory employee who has heavily criticized Law Enforcement Academy officials during previous meetings, said during a public hearing Tuesday that the board is primarily made up of police officers, and "there are a lot of things police officers wish not to discuss, concerning police affairs. The public needs the right to put things on the agenda and to have discussion."

Susan Boe, director of the nonprofit New Mexico Foundation for Open Government, did not attend the meeting but wrote a letter to the board opposing the proposed changes. "Openness and transparency build trust while secrecy breeds suspicion and discontent," she said in the letter.

The proposed changes come as police departments across the country have been under scrutiny over use-of-force policies and what many activists perceive as poor community relations with the public. Activists have asked police departments to reform police training to help prevent deadly situations when officers patrol the streets.

The New Mexico Law Enforcement Academy, which trains recruits for police departments across the state, came under fire a couple of years ago after it adopted a use-of-force curriculum that gave officers more leeway on when to use their firearms. That tactic was taught under former academy Director Jack Jones, who left the position in December.

Mechels has filed a lawsuit against the board over the way it has adopted police training tactics.



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Chris Mechels, a retired Los Alamos National Laboratory employee, speaks with Joseph Dworak, an attorney for the board that oversees the New Mexico Law Enforcement Academy, and board member Elisabeth Miller during a public hearing Tuesday at which the board discussed proposed changes. Luis Sánchez Saturno/The New Mexican

On Tuesday, he told board member Elisabeth Miller and Joseph Dworak, an attorney for the board, that allowing the board chairman or academy director to reject agenda items would cut public access to the board.

Miller presented the proposed measures during a poorly attended public hearing. Besides Miller and Dworak, only about three community members and a half-dozen academy employees were present. The nine-member academy board, which is chaired by state Attorney General Hector Balderas, a Democrat, is expected to vote on the changes during a two-day meeting starting Sept. 6 in Ruidoso.

Currently, the board's rulebook says anyone from the public can ask the director to place a subject on a public meeting agenda for discussion.

"My experience has been that this is the only effective way of bringing things to the board because frankly there are a lot of items that the public wish the board would discuss but the board wishes not to discuss," Mechels said.

But Miller and academy Director Stephan Marshall disagreed. Every board meeting includes a public comment period, Marshall said, so anyone in the audience can address board members. If no one filters the topics on the agenda, he added, the board members will not be able to finish a meeting in a timely manner.

After the hearing, Miller said in an interview that the proposed changes are not final and that the board could decide to table the measures in order to get more public input. But she wouldn't say if she would vote on the changes as they stand now.

"This isn't the end of all of this," Miller said. "So any comments that were made today will be discussed and considered for further changes down the line."

Miller and Balderas were the only two board members who commented for this story. The other seven board members did not respond to messages seeking comment, including state Police Chief Pete Kassetas.

James Hallinan, a spokesman for the attorney general, declined to comment on whether Balderas would vote for the proposed changes, saying it would be "inappropriate."

"The rules hearing is not a forum for board member input. It is instead an opportunity for the public to relay their comments and concerns," Hallinan said. "Board members will have a later opportunity to comment upon the rules. Thus, it is inappropriate for the Office of the Attorney General to comment upon the rules at this time."

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