

CPRAB Minutes – May 22, 2023

The May 2023 regular meeting of the Civilian Police Review and Advisory Board (CPRAB or Board) of Morgantown, WV was called to order at 12:05 pm on May 22, 2023 by Chair Rich Burks.

Members present, in addition to Rich Burks, were Rachel Fetty, Nikki Lauffer, Bob Cohen, Megan Gandy, Dady Dadyburjour, Bryan Church and Catherine Fonseca. Also present were P.J. Scott, Deputy Chief, and Matt Solomon, Captain, Morgantown Police Department. It was explained that Chief Eric Powell could not be present because he was called out all night the previous evening.

Because this was the first meeting after the appointments of Bryan Church and Catherine Fonseca, the members of the Board introduced themselves and described their backgrounds and interest in serving as members of the CPRAB. Deputy Chief Scott and Captain Solomon described their experience as police officers and members of the Morgantown Police Department (MPD).

The Minutes of the April regular meeting were unanimously approved on motion of Nikki Lauffer seconded by Rachel Fetty.

Rich Burks described his vision for the Board as a means for involving Morgantown residents in public safety, serving as a conduit between the public and the MPD, and being a means for reviewing MPD policies and procedures and data generated by law enforcement.

Deputy Chief Scott said that the MPD was viewing the Board with an open mind and would value the opinions, suggestions and recommendations of the Board. He described the existence of the Board as an opportunity for the MPD to have another set of eyes viewing its work.

In response to a question by Deputy Chief Scott about the expectations of the CPRAB, members of the Board responded in terms of open lines of communication, timely responses to requests, developing community understanding of how the police do their job, enhancing safety both for police officers and the community, openness to Board review of MPD policies and procedures, the avoidance of bad reactions when difficult situations arise, and development of mutual trust in a spirit of cooperation.

There was then a discussion of the MPD's needs and concerns. Deputy Chief Scott said that staffing is lower now than it has been since 2004. The MPD has hired seven officers in the past 12 months, but there have been five retirements with three more officers set to leave. Reasons for attrition were discussed, as were recruitment and retention strategies. There are 76 officers authorized. The seven new academy graduates will bring the number of officers to 62, but they expect to lose five or six officers this year.

Training of officers was discussed. Traditionally, officers have gone to the state police academy for training, for which there is a 6-7 month waiting period, but there is now a training program at Fairmont State University which appears to be successful. After the academy training, there is field training in Morgantown – 12 weeks riding with another officer and then two more weeks being shadowed.

Board members asked if there is a handbook for patrolmen setting forth the MPD procedures for doing a traffic stop or approaching a citizen on the street. Captain Solomon said that no such handbook exists. Board members described encounters with police where officers acted in an aggressive way which intimidated the citizens involved unnecessarily.

Board members suggested that we jointly create a case study - perhaps using the incident at Sheetz where a black woman was arrested - where the Board and MPD look together at the videos and discuss our perspectives on what happened and how it might have been handled differently. Captain Solomon was favorable to the suggestion.

The use of body cameras was discussed, and a delay between the start of the video and the start of the audio. It was agreed that body cameras should fully record the entire incident. The MPD no longer has in-car cameras. Deputy Chief Scott explained MPD procedures for periodically reviewing the videotapes produced by officers; body cameras.

Board members asked about ways to recognize and praise officers who make a positive impact on the community.

Board members noted that some of the MPD recruiting materials emphasizes a militaristic approach to policing.

Board members then asked about the statistics kept by the MPD. Deputy Chief Scott described the types of statistics kept in general terms. Board members requested a list of all of the different variables that are available through the statistics. Deputy Chief Scott said that he could supply it to the Board.

There was discussion of having representatives of the MPD at future Board meetings.

The next regular Board meeting was tentatively scheduled for June 12.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:43 pm on motion of Rachel Fetty seconded by Dady Dadyburjour.