

Anne Arundel human rights groups want Police Accountability Board proposal to include more investigatory powers



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With 49 amendments and counting to the Anne Arundel County Police Accountability Board bill, both sides of the debate are still dissatisfied.

Human rights groups still think there's more work to be done, while law enforcement advocates feel the process is demeaning police.

The county, along with every other jurisdiction in Maryland, is mandated by state law to [create a Police Accountability Board](#) by July 1 to review complaints of police misconduct, overhauling the current system of governance for police complaints which is the Law Enforcement Officer's Bill of Rights, a law that will be replaced with this new process.

The five-hour-plus meeting Monday night was mostly spent on public testimony on the bill. Many speakers were members of the Anne Arundel County Coalition for Police Accountability, a group of several human rights organizations including the ACLU of Maryland, the Annapolis Human Relations Commission, Annapolis Pride and the Anne Arundel NAACP. The group convened to ensure this new board would provide the highest level of accountability possible.

This group also rallied before the meeting advocating further reform.



William Rowel, advisor to Annapolis Mayor Gavin Buckley, holds a sign at People's Park in Annapolis at a rally for police accountability Monday night

During the meeting, many coalition speakers focused on a list of demands, chief among them being that the board be given investigatory powers. As currently written in the bill, board members have more of an oversight role while the law enforcement agencies investigate complaints of their own departments.

"We know that police departments historically have hidden information from attorneys, from courts and later on we find out that individuals were wrongly convicted," said Joshua Hatch, public safety committee chairman of the Caucus of African American Leaders of Anne Arundel County. "This is something that is a concern so this Police Accountability Board needs the ability to investigate, needs the power to investigate separately from what is being provided by the police department because no one can guarantee that a police department is going to provide the PAB with the information that they seek."

County Executive Steuart Pittman said he understands the desire for the board to have investigation powers, but believes it would violate state law.

"The state bill was written with an effort to have uniformity across the state and counties in the way that complaints are considered," Pittman said. "We believe that if we did that [gave investigative powers to the board] it would immediately be challenged in the courts and that it would not proceed."

Another coalition request advocates for the board to include five members representing five organizations — Anne Arundel NAACP, Caucus of African American Leaders of Anne Arundel County, United Black Clergy, Community Actively Seeking Transparency and CASA. Other requests involve budgeting which will be discussed in the coming weeks as the county approves its annual budget.

County Council member Sarah Lacey, a Jessup Democrat, said she's worked closely with the coalition to find a way to meet their needs while still complying with state law.

Only about half of the amendments have been voted on so far. Some changes aimed at specifying the board's diversity, part of the coalition's request, were passed on Monday. Others providing the board with some investigatory powers have yet to be heard.

Perhaps the coalition's biggest win of the evening was getting rid of the five nonvoting members, which were to be the Anne Arundel County Police Chief or a designee, the Annapolis Police Chief or a designee, the Anne Arundel County Sheriff or a designee, the county's director of equity, diversity and inclusion and human relations officer. Lacey said this was a compromise she worked on related to the coalition's request to get its own representatives on the board.

"I believe you [council members] all have good hearts. I'm trusting that you will do the right thing, assure the citizens and the residents of our good county that we are continuing with the momentum of change," said Bishop Antonio Palmer, president of the United Black Clergy. "I've seen you guys do some good work. Don't let politics get in the way. I know it's voting season. Let's just do the right thing."

Anne Arundel County Coalition for Police Accountability members Rev. Marguerite Morris, founder of the Community Activity Seeking Transparency and Emma Buchman, director of the March on Maryland

"We're not anti-police. We're anti-bad police," said Rev. Marguerite Morris with Communities Actively Seeking Transparency.

Another group of speakers were representatives from the Police Community Relations Council, many of whom supported the bill without any major changes.

"I have come to realize over the years how lucky this county is to have such dedicated officers who are well trained and go above and beyond to serve the citizens of this county to the best of their ability," said Cathy Fleshman from the Western District council.

Many from the council praised the county's police, saying that giving the board more power, as suggested by the coalition, would disrespect the sacrifices police make.

"We should be applauding our officers every single day. They put their life on the line every single day," said Victor Smith from Severn. "People are killing people out here and that is true life."