

Alton's Community Policing initiative behind on goals, but still optimistic

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May 17 2017 2:11 PM



ALTON - So, the City of Alton, the Alton Police Department and community stakeholders have missed both the 30- and 60-day goals created by the Community Relations Commission. What is next for the city?

Alton Community Relations Commission President Peter Hough said those deadlines were created from a [special meeting of the commission held on March 15, 2017](#), meaning both the 30-day and 60-day deadlines have passed. When asked why the

deadlines were able to come and go with limited results, Hough said the commission had to contend with a city administration in transition following the April 4, 2017, election as well as a lack of participation from community stakeholders and a lack of people on the commission - which now has three open seats after a fourth was filled by the new Alton City Attorney Rodney Caffey.

After the resignation of former Alton City Attorney Megan Williams was cut short at the end of April 2017, the commission was left with only seven of an 11 possible membership as it required six present to make a quorum.

"This means if two people could not make a meeting, we could not get anything done," Hough said.

Hough had a meeting with Alton Mayor Brant Walker, Alton Police Chief Jason "Jake" Simmons and fellow commission member Judge Ellar Duff to discuss the issue of community policing as it currently stands as well as how it will stand in the future. Williams was the go-between for the city to former St. Louis Police Chief Daniel Isom, who facilitated a comprehensive community policing study in Alton through the University of Missouri St. Louis (UMSL). That meeting was held early last week, and saw the position of the go-between being given to Simmons.

Simmons said the original goals were "not realistic," saying he was more optimistic with future goals. He said Isom was coming sometime next week - either for the Community Relations Commission meeting or the general city council meeting - to speak to all of the alderpeople regarding the importance of the community policing initiative. Simmons said some of the newly-elected alderpeople may not be as familiar with the initiative as they should be, saying a meeting with Isom would be a great start for a redo on the 30-, 60- and 90-day goals created by the Community Relations Commission.

Hough agrees with Simmons's assessment of reorienting the goals to take place following a further address by Isom to the entire city council. He said he hoped the council would get to meet with Isom the night of their regularly scheduled meeting, so further talks with Isom could take place on the nights of those meetings on the 30-, 60- and 90-day goal deadlines. He also believes in Simmons's genuine commitment to make community policing among his highest priorities.

"He has a genuine commitment to community policing, and he wants to see it through," Hough said Wednesday morning of Simmons. "I hope the administration frees up time for him to devote to it. It needs a point person to give it several hours a week."

Walker has committed himself to the goals of the commission as well, Hough said. He said Walker committed the resources of Kimberly Clark - his current Chief of Staff - to

assist. Walker also promised Hough and Duff community policing would be one of the top priorities of Caffey as he takes Williams's position as the city attorney.

One of the methods the city is doing to ensure Simmons has time to dedicate to community policing was [the promotion of Sgt. Terry Buhs to the position of deputy chief](#) - a position which has not been filled since 2009 due to financial concerns.

That promotion was used by Simmons to show the city is freeing more time for him to dedicate to the cause of community policing, but Hough said he was not sure how that promotion would or would not affect the cause. He said as many as 10 hours a week should be dedicated to community policing, however.

Time is one of the main concerns of Simmons, who said Wednesday afternoon he understood the amount of dedication and work community policing will inevitably take him and his administration.

"We are behind," Simmons admitted. "The election put us behind. When Isom gets done speaking, we should be getting back on track with the changes we need to make. I thought 90 days was unrealistic when we started this way back in January. Now, those changes seem more realistic to be implemented in 90 days. We still need to meet with department heads, civil servants, officers and community leaders. There is a lot of work to this, but I am remaining positive and will work toward our goals."

Within 30 days, the police department and community stakeholders should have done the following:

- Identified teams
- Scheduled meetings
- Defined objectives
- Gathered statistics

Within 60 days, the police department and community stakeholders should have done the following:

- Developed a written plan
- Developed an evaluative strategy

Since these things have not been done, the commission has to hold the city, police department and community stakeholders accountable. Hough said everyone is "pretty far behind" on goals, adding the transition after the election "took more time than believed

it should have." That being said, Hough is optimistic next week's opportunity for the entire city council to hear Isom speak about goals will reinvigorate the city, police and community stakeholders to become dedicated to the initiative again.

When asked if he believed community policing changes could have prevented the violence seen last weekend in Alton - with a [non-fatal shooting at Riverside Saloon early Saturday morning](#), and a [fatal shooting on Union Street early Sunday morning](#) - he said it would be part of an overall plan to make Alton safer through "positive peace."

"I don't think community policing is the one 'silver bullet' to get us to peace," Hough said. "Justice in housing, increased jobs and economic opportunities with a fair shot for everyone, care for people trapped in addiction and people able to see doctors when they need to are good things regardless of someone's political affiliation. Everybody wants their community to be well, and community policing is definitely a step toward that."

To Hough, "community policing" does not mean police are able to "crack down" on more criminals. He said such action would create a sort of "negative peace" with a heavy cloud of tension. Instead, Hough sees community policing as a plan built between the community and police department to better hold each other accountable for failures of either to maintain positive peace.

"Community policing is rebuilding relationships between the community and police department," Hough said.

"It gives people an understanding that authority ultimately rests with the people. The people are able to decide how it gets policed while creating a positive and productive relationship with police officers. Officers know and trust the authority is given to them and will not be undermined or taken back. They will also know they will be respected and the community will understand and respect the dangers and hardships of their jobs."

If that sounds utopian or overly-optimistic, Hough and Simmons both realize the amount of work it will take to get to that point. Isom does as well. Isom said Alton was the first community willing to open both its entire community and police department to the comprehensive study, however. Given that, even this current failure to meet goals and expectations should be taken as a minor step backwards in a situation whose unfaltering goal will remain to be the future.

Simmons said current community policing measures have already shown their worth. He said more people are calling the department with tips - especially in the two violent weekend incidents - adding the department is unaware of community issues, such as

drug houses and traffic issues, until they are notified by the community. Simmons said such calls are coming at a renewed high since the issue of community policing has taken center stage in regards to the Alton Police Department.

Hough also called for more community input, saying the three vacated seats on the commission are currently open for anyone wanting to apply for them. The applications are currently being proofed by both the city and the commission before they are allowed to be filled by the public. Hough said anyone who would like to apply for a stake in the community's future who is also willing to work is welcome to apply. The final decision for the seats belongs to the city, however.