KC CHAMBER AND CIVIC COUNCIL RELEASE JOINT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR KCMO POLICING

After months of joint study and research, the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce and the Civic Council of Greater Kansas City are releasing their first three recommendations on police governance and public safety. The goal of the two organizations has been to study how the Kansas City Police Department’s (KCPD) governance, policies, and procedures can build community trust while advancing safety, equity, and justice.

“Our joint effort was established in response to the city’s high rate of violent crime, protests that arose last summer, and, because, for the business community, public safety is a critical component to creating inclusive economic growth for our region,” says Steve Edwards, Board Chair of the Civic Council. “We appreciate the high level of engagement from so many.”

The work of the two organizations has included a series of 35 meetings, including 14 listening sessions with community groups, law enforcement, local prosecutors, national law enforcement and police oversight organizations, and members of the KCMO Board of Police Commissioners (BOPC), as well as extensive research into best practices and peer cities’ police reform actions.

“As we listened and studied these issues, our overarching desire has been to find some common ground, not an easy task either nationally or locally,” says Carolyn Watley, Chair of the KC Chamber. “We hope these recommendations help move our community forward.”

The recommendations being released today are:

1. **Investigation of police department personnel should be independent of the Kansas City Police Department for all cases of excessive use of force and all complaints brought by the public.**

   During the listening sessions, the KC Chamber and Civic Council heard sharply divergent assessments regarding the effectiveness of KCPD’s investigations of department personnel actions. While representatives of both the KCPD and the Office of Community Complaints (OCC) maintain that the current process is independent of the department, under additional scrutiny, it appears that there are several critical points in which independence is not consistently achieved.

   Among the concerns: high-level police department personnel, including the Chief of Police, are
made aware of the details of complaints against department members very early in the process and those individuals have the potential to influence the OCC’s process and findings; discussions, which could be perceived as negotiation, between the OCC and KCPD leadership occurs after investigations are completed, but before presenting a finding to the BOPC; the officials charged with investigating complaints are members of the department’s Internal Affairs Unit; and the police chief is given an opportunity to disagree with OCC investigative findings prior to presentation to the BOPC.

Based on broad citizen dissatisfaction with current lack of transparency and trust in fairness of the investigatory process and based on a long, historic demand from citizens for more fairness in police investigations, it is time for real change.

**Action Recommendations:**

- **Restructure the current review process so that it will employ industry best-practices, emphasizes transparency, is fully independent of the KCPD, and reports directly to the BOPC.** This new structure should include individuals that will be empowered and trained to review all complaints of excessive use of force and other complaints brought by members of the community. This recommendation is not designed to supplant the KCPD’s own internal investigations of personnel matters; rather, it is to ensure independent and transparent investigations by an outside review entity in certain cases.
- **Allow fully independent investigation of police officer actions independent of KCPD police involvement and eliminate reconsideration of decisions based on input from KCPD prior to submission of those recommendations to the BOPC.** KCPD will have the ability to appeal any findings at the conclusion of the BOPC determination.
- **Identify funding mechanisms to provide resources for an independent investigative staff.**
- **The reformed structure must employ dedicated, professional, and legally-empowered investigators from outside KCPD.**
- **A community advisory council should be re-engaged in the process to provide guidance on the community complaint process and act as a communications bridge between the community and KCPD.**

2. **The City and Board of Police Commissioners should engage in dialogue – rather than litigation - to find common ground regarding the department’s current budget and other contentious issues.** The current back-and-forth between the two entities does nothing to reduce the city’s high level of violent crime nor does it improve the relations between the community and the police department. Engaging in protracted litigation diverts funds and wastes valuable time and energy that could better be used to shore up police resources and improve processes.

While those interviewed in the listening sessions share the common goal of increased public safety for all, those discussions also revealed ideological entrenchment and adversarial positioning.

Those divisions have been borne out in some actions taken by our public bodies. While our organizations respect the City Council’s need for accountability for taxpayer dollars and work for more fiscal certainty, community input, and transparency, its members strongly disagree with
the flawed and opaque process used to create the KCMO Community Services and Prevention Fund. The BOPC’s response to immediately initiate litigation only exacerbated the problem. Similarly strained relationships exist in other public dialogue between the Jackson County Prosecutor’s Office, BOPC, and KCPD.

Despite the extreme differences, the KC Chamber and Civic Council believe there is common ground on which all sides of these debates can agree: the city has financial responsibility for the KCPD; the BOPC has the responsibility for managing the department; our area Prosecutor’s offices act as a critical partner to ensure transparency, accountability, and justice in public safety, citizens should be heard and able to live without the threat of violence or retaliation; and the majority of police officers provide great service to the community.

The two business organizations call on the City Council, BOPC, Jackson County Prosecutor’s Office, KCPD, and other community stakeholders, to acknowledge their differences of opinion, but, nevertheless, find common ground and move community dialogue forward. The Civic Council and KC Chamber stand ready to serve as an intermediary for those discussions, which should also include committed community members. Both organizations are willing to bring their commitment to the region, varied expertise, and financial resources to bring all parties around a common table.

Action recommendation:

- The KCMO City Council, BOPC, and KCPD must immediately initiate open-minded and inclusive dialogue, that includes additional voices from the community, aimed at resolution as a best next step for improved KCMO public safety

3. As vacancies on the Board of Police Commissioners occur, we encourage the appointment of new members who reflect the racial, ethnic, and geographic diversity of the community KCPD serves.

The KC Chamber and Civic Council recognize that their work on these issues will continue beyond making these recommendations. We pledge to work with other stakeholders on these and related public safety issues which are still to be addressed, including local control and diversity within the department. Additional findings will be forthcoming.

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