



City of Ashtabula
Ashtabula City Council
Safety Forces Committee
Monday, February 27, 2023 at 8:45 AM
4717 Main Avenue, Ashtabula, OH 44004

Minutes

Opening of Committee Meeting

Call to Order

The meeting of the Ashtabula City Council Safety Forces Committee was called to order at 8:45 a.m. by Committee Chair Speelman.

Roll Call

Members Present: Chair: Council Vice President Michael Speelman, Vice Chair: Ward 1 Councilor Kym Foglio, Member: Council President John Roskovics

Absent: none

Officers Present: City Manager James Timonere, City Solicitor Cecilia Cooper, Clerk of Council McKenzie Burgan

Ashtabula Department Heads Present: Police Chief Robert Stell

Visitors: FBI Special Agent Sullivan, Ashtabula Police Department Lieutenant Palinkas

Sunshine Law Certification

A quorum was established as defined by the Ashtabula City Council Rules of Order. The meeting met the requirements of the Ohio Sunshine Law Open Meetings Act.

Welcome and Acknowledgement of Visitors

Chair Vice President Michael Speelman welcomed guests FBI Special Agent Sullivan, Ashtabula Police Department Lieutenant Palinkas, and the Gazette to the meeting.

Special Guest Presentation

FBI Agent Sullivan and Lieutenant Palinkas

FBI Special Agent Sullivan stated that their part of the task force, the Safe Streets Task Force, is a nationwide effort to combat narcotics and gang activity. About 15 months ago, they got into a partnership with the Ashtabula Police Department. He stated that the FBI has 56 field divisions that cover the whole country and the closest one is Cleveland. Their size compared to other divisions is ranked 23 out of 56. They have 190 agents on board in the Cleveland division. Their New York office is their largest with just under 1,100 agents. Since their partnership with the Ashtabula Police Department, they were ranked number one in the Cleveland Division for gun seizures. They are ranked 23rd in size but number 7 nationwide. Since being partnered with APD, they have made 50 arrests and 56 drug seizures that total just shy of 13.5 kilograms of drugs, recovered 32 guns, had 24 indictments, and of those indictments, 12 have been convicted. If you compare their statistics from October 1, 2022-today to last years, they are ahead of their statistical accomplishments. They are a part of the Mahoning Valley Task Force which is out of Youngstown. Youngstown has 28 task force officers and the Painesville office has 2 full-time and 10 part-time task force officers. They are

very impressed with the leadership of the APD, Chief Stell, and Lieutenant Palinkas.

Chair Vice President Michael Speelman said thank you to all of them for all they do and for being at the meeting. He stated that the annual report shows all the things the task force has been doing over the year in the last few pages and it is impressive. He asked if this partnership would continue into the future and Special Agent Sullivan said yes, this is a long-term relationship. Mr. Speelman asked if there is any need to grow. Special Agent Sullivan stated they would like to expand. They are happy with where they are right now, but there are other communities that have drug problems similar to Ashtabula, where they could increase their footprint and help them out.

City Manager Timonere stated that this is based out of the city, but this task force can go to other places within the county and country if they find leads that generate here. Having other departments within the county be part of this task force would open up chances at scoring grants for different projects and staffing.

Chair Vice President Michael Speelman stated he thinks it is impressive that our police department is working with the FBI and are getting the bad stuff and bad people off the streets.

Vice Chair Ward 1 Councilor Kym Foglio asked if branching out into other communities means communities around our area and if that would be in conjunction with starting something bigger. Chief Stell stated that if there is some interest in nearby communities, that would have to be coordinated with the FBI, but he has no issue with bringing other agencies on board and expanding it. He stated they are doing really well with what they have right now but are not against improving on that.

Member President John Roskovics asked Special Agent Sullivan if the drug seizures are drugs from out of the area coming in and how this all works. If they get arrested here for drugs, does this go through our court system? Special Agent Sullivan stated that with their experience here in Ashtabula, the cocaine they are seeing is coming from Puerto Rico, and the heroin and meth started coming from Texas but are now coming from California. Due to the weight of the drugs they are seeing here, cases are being taken to the Federal Government. Most defendants they are arresting have significant criminal histories and an amount of drugs that hit the federal guidelines for a mandatory minimum of a 10-year sentence. Coordination with the Solicitor's office is done constantly and if the case is appropriate, they will stay in the city, but if it is suggested they go to the federal government, they will do that too. They are interested in coordinating with other cities within the county, but he reiterated what Chief Stell stated that they are comfortable with where they are at.

Member President John Roskovics mentioned that at one time we were a really big meth area. He asked if this is still the case now. Special Agent Sullivan stated that most are now coming in from out of state through people or the mail and this is the end of the line for drugs as it is a user community. They work with other federal and state partners to investigate where the drugs are coming from and try to get them off the streets. They are seeing a lot of overdose stats and are trying to figure out who is selling the stuff laced with fentanyl and want to get these statistics as low as they can.

City Solicitor Cooper stated that a lot of the drugs we see in our area are not what people think they are buying. Most drugs are laced with fentanyl or fentanyl compounds. This is seen in a lot of drugs being seized from users. A lot of the people being investigated are significant drug dealers who have large quantities of drugs. The case will go where the biggest sentence is available. If this is at the federal level and they will take on the case, that is where they will send it. The task force has been extremely successful in getting some high-level dealers with large quantities of drugs off our streets and they should be commended.

Member President John Roskovics stated that with fentanyl being deadly, why are the dealers putting it in the drugs? You would think they would not want to try and kill their customers. Lieutenant Palinkas stated it is the addiction rate that drives this. Heroin manufacturing was reliant on crop cycles and fentanyl and the 100 or so analogs are made in a lab, cheaper to manufacture, and are being shipped into our country in bulk, which is making its way to our communities. Lab reports have come back now with maybe a little bit of heroin and 3 or 4 different fentanyl analogs in a mixture. The same goes for methamphetamine. With the professional labs pumping out large quantities of methamphetamine, it is now \$40/gram instead of \$100/gram like back in the day. Fentanyl can now also be bought for \$50-\$60/gram when heroin used to be \$100-\$200/gram. Because of this, there has been a shift in the task force where they are now trying to target the larger-scale traffickers because if they can take it off as they are coming into the community, that saves a lot of lower-level issues. They have disrupted a couple of major Cleveland networks over the last year and some of the individuals are looking at 30 years. Nuisance houses are still addressed. If they can take out the major drug shipments as they are coming into the community, this will affect the lower-level dealers and the crime associated with them.

Chair Vice President Michael Speelman asked if they have noticed a slowdown in response to what they are doing in terms of drugs or if this is a continuous battle. Chief Stell stated there has been a significant spike in fentanyl, so their numbers are going to go up. They have had some intelligence stating that there are some drug dealers who do not want to mess around in the city. They need to find a way to slow the level of fentanyl coming across the border. The task force has made an impact. In the past, they focused more on quantity or quality and built up big stats, and made a lot of low-level arrests, but this was not getting them anywhere. They are now taking more time and putting the work into the cases to get a better yield, as far as seizures and getting people incarcerated for 10 years or more. Chief Stell wanted to state their partnership with the Solicitor's office had been wonderful. He stated that Special Agent Sullivan said Ashtabula is ahead of the larger communities as far as their task force work.

Member John Roskovics asked Special Agent Sullivan if crimes such as human trafficking are part of the task force's duties. Special Agent Sullivan stated he has spent most of his career doing crimes against children cases and these are still being done here. Lieutenant Palinkas and Detective Gayle are both deputized federally in Title 18 and Title 21. Title 21 is the drug investigations and Title 18 is everything else. Title 18 gives them the ability to be Federal Agents in regard to crimes against children and human trafficking cases. They do make arrests in regard to human trafficking and crimes against children within Ashtabula City and County.

City Manager Timonere stated that since they decided to start the NIU and work with the FBI on the Safe Streets Initiative, it has gone above and beyond what was expected in the beginning and has been a significant move for the city in tackling these issues. He stated that no one has heard about these statistics the whole year because they do not want to publicize the situations too soon to negatively affect their cases.

Chair Vice President Michael Speelman thanks everyone for getting along and working well together.

Vice Chair Ward 1 Councilor Kym Foglio asked if we still have a hotline where we can report suspicious activity or report a drug house. Lieutenant Palinkas stated they have an active tip line. People can call and remain anonymous or identify themselves and state the problem. The number is (440)992-7126. They caution everyone not to call the tip line and leave a voicemail if it is something active as the line is not monitored 24/7. They do try and follow up on every call received. City

Manager Timonere pointed out that some people may leave a message with this tip line and don't see anything happen right away. APD takes every call received and plans what needs to be done. They typically do not respond with their course of action so residents may not see anything for a few weeks as they work on the case.

Vice Chair Ward 1 Councilor Kym Foglio stated that they are still trying to get the small people and advised everyone to keep calling that hotline so we can get the people next door. Chief Stell stated that sometimes the small one leads to the big one. He states they are not driven by numbers but rather results.

Police Department – Chief's Report

January 2023 Safety Forces Meeting Memo

January 2023 APD Safety Stats

Chief Stell stated that the January stats had nothing unusual, they were typical winter-time statistics. They had 1,200 calls for service. These usually jump up to 1,400-1,500 calls beginning around May and going on until September.

Ashtabula Police Department 2022 Annual Report

Chief Stell stated the annual report had been completed. There is not much to note there. It is much of the same as last year regarding the different programs they are involved with. A notable thing is that Safety Town is going well. They have raised a fair amount of donations, and more are coming in. The buildings are done and at the school now. Chief Stell stated he invited Special Agent Sullivan and Lieutenant Palinkas to be at the meeting to report more on the Safe Streets Task Force and the Narcotics Investigative Unit. The Narcotics Investigative Unit is the local task force and the Safe Streets Task Force is the FBI. Many of the Narcotics Investigative Unit members belong to the Safe Streets Task Force as well. The Safe Streets Task Force investigates other serious crimes, but it is primarily narcotics. He stated he had a conversation with Special Agent Sullivan regarding how well they are doing in comparison to other agencies and task forces around Ohio.

Fire Department – Chief's Report

Chief Gruber will report on the Fire Department's Annual Report when he is at the next meeting.

City Manager's Report

City Manager Timonere stated that at the last council meeting, he brought up the Hiram Ave. no-parking request. The chief did this report and 4 out of 5 residents responded back in a positive way about no parking from 6:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. during school days only. This ordinance will be coming to the council shortly. Currently, there is one police officer position open. There is an advertisement out right now for lateral transfers. They have exhausted their civil service list, so an entrance test will eventually need to be done. The Police Department has a lieutenant's test in April and the Fire Department has captain and lieutenant tests in April as well. He mentioned that the Ohio Revised Code has changed a little bit in regard to the hiring of police officers and firefighters. There are now maximum ages for hiring. The Ohio Revised Code does allow for municipalities to set their own age limit and in discussion with the chief and solicitor, they have decided 65 will be their cutoff. The reason for this is that there are some experienced officers out there that have been put into school resource officer positions where they can bring their knowledge and security to the school system. This ordinance will be brought to the council so they are in compliance with the Ohio Revised Code with any future hirings.

City Solicitor's Report

City Solicitor Cooper stated they are still working on the ordinance to streamline the evidence

destruction as it has turned into a bigger project than initially anticipated. The street sign map has also turned into a bigger project and they will speak with Chief Stell about this.

Unfinished Business

None.

New Business

None.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be on March 27th at 8:45 a.m.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 9:18 AM by Chair Vice President Michael Speelman.

Attested by: Clerk of Council McKenzie Burgan