

Elizabeth gives detective squad 21-officer boost

Move comes as feud with prosecutor grows

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As Elizabeth reassigned nearly two-dozen police officers to the detective bureau, the Union County prosecutor kept the pressure on city leaders to give him four investigators for his newly created homicide task force.

In July, the mayor of Elizabeth refused an order by the Union County Prosecutor's Office to hand over four city police detectives to the task force.

Mayor J. Christian Bollwage said the prosecutor didn't have the authority to make that demand. Prosecutor Theodore Romankow disagreed, but the mayor didn't budge, and the unit was created without the city's assistance.

In the ensuing months, the relationship between the two men has grown more acrimonious, and now a showdown may be looming after Romankow revealed he would not rule out taking over the 350-member Elizabeth Police Department.

The prosecutor's statement came after yesterday's ceremony marking the reassignment of 21 Elizabeth police officers to the detective squad.

During his address to those officers and their families and friends in Elizabeth City Hall council chambers, Bollwage reiterated that residents shouldn't have to pay for the police department to investigate homicides in other municipalities.

Bollwage said the police will continue to share information with the prosecutor's office, as it has done in the past.

"The only difference that we have with the Union County prosecutor," he said in response to a reporter's question, is that "the men and women who work for the Elizabeth police and the Elizabeth taxpayer will continue to work for the Elizabeth police and the Elizabeth taxpayer, and not support the Union County Prosecutor's Office."

The Elizabeth city attorney, Bollwage said, concluded that Romankow doesn't have the constitutional power to order the four detectives to his task force, and that in a subsequent meeting the mayor had with state Attorney General Anne Milgram, she said the order would be "relaxed."

Peter Aseltine, a spokesman for the attorney general, would not confirm that statement. Likewise, he refused to comment on prosecutorial power when it comes to local police departments, saying only that "the goal of the attorney general's office is to get everybody on the same page."

The feud between Bollwage and Romankow had been simmering for months before the formation of the homicide task force. The prosecutor has accused the mayor of ignoring the city's gang problem, while the mayor said the prosecutor's office unnecessarily delayed the arrest of suspected killers.

Elizabeth's refusal to work with the prosecutor's office on the task force is "not a dead issue, certainly not with me," Romankow said yesterday afternoon, adding that he may pursue legal action to have the detectives assigned. Going a step further, he said, "I'm not precluding the possibility to take over the police."

During yesterday's noontime ceremony, the mayor called each new detective up to be acknowledged. Since August, those officers had been part of the police department's renewed focus on street-level drug dealers and organized crime operations, which has led to 210 arrests, including 41 suspected drug dealers, said Police Director James Cosgrove.

The mayor said that "what the prosecutor has done by taking over the homicides, he has freed up many detectives in our city to work on other fronts and we welcome that opportunity to help solve other crimes that we didn't have the manpower to do."

The new detectives will work at night, the first time the department has had a nighttime detective squad, Cosgrove said. "They won't be tied to their desks," he said of the new detectives, who will each receive \$2,500 more a year. "Their desks will be four wheels. They will be proactive."

Romankow, meanwhile, says he's frustrated that police are not helping with homicide investigations, even though the task force was created, he maintains, in response to the high number of unsolved murders in Elizabeth.

The 16-member task force, which was officially rolled out last month and includes detectives from other Union County towns, is understaffed, the prosecutor said, but "doing an effective job. We need more assistance."

Help from Elizabeth isn't likely to come anytime soon, with the police director and police chief siding with the mayor.

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