

EDITORIAL

Pursuit an issue in Suffolk crash?

Incident that killed 3 needs careful look

Saturday night around 11:45, a Suffolk County police officer saw a 2015 Nissan Rogue fail to stop at a stop sign at Yaphank Avenue and Main Street in Yaphank. According to Police Commissioner Geraldine Hart, it was only a few minutes later and about four miles away on Route 25 in Middle Island that the Rogue, driven by Nahriek Belford, 17, struck a car trying to turn left, killing driver Jerome Weingarten, 74, his wife, Randee, 71, and Belford's half-brother, Angelo, 19.

What happened in those minutes and miles between Nahriek Belford's alleged failure to stop when an officer tried to pull him over and the crash needs scrutiny. If police pursuit leads to the deaths of innocents, the wisdom of the tactics will always be questioned.

Specifics about what happened need to be better understood before an answer emerges. But studies show high-speed chases not justified by the initial crime or infraction are a deadly problem in New York. A USA Today Network analysis of such deaths between 1995 and 2015 showed Suffolk County leading the state in fatalities stemming from high-speed accidents related to police pursuit of crime suspects, with at least nine deaths in that period. Often the incidents that prompt pursuits are not serious enough to justify the dangers of that pursuit, according to policing experts and the federal government.

The three deaths Saturday brought the fatalities related to police pursuit by Suffolk County officers to eight in a year. On Valentine's Day 2018, a Bellport man fleeing police in a stolen 2018 Camaro topped 150 mph before hitting a Mazda in Ridge, killing four people in that vehicle as well as his passenger, according to police. That incident is a particularly good example of the tough questions that arise about heated pursuit. The police were informed of the stolen Camaro in that case by an OnStar navigation system activated when the car was reported taken. The tracking system would have allowed officers to safely locate the car, and possibly the driver, at any time.

The National Institute of Justice, part of the U.S. Department of Justice, says that because high-speed chases are so dangerous, "For any one other than a violent felon, the balance weighs against a high-speed chase." Some police departments allow vehicle chases only for known or suspected violent felons. In Suffolk County, the department so far has not provided its pursuit protocols to the media. In 2011, after a woman was killed in Bohemia when a car carrying three people accused of shoplifting clothing and pursued by police slammed into her vehicle, the department said officers could pursue suspects avoiding arrest, suspected of violent felonies or endangering others. But the rules also said pursuits must be ended if they endanger officers or the public, a very tough call to make mid-chase.

Such pursuits also cost the public money. Last year, Suffolk County paid \$1.5 million to the family of a Mastic teen killed after a crash involving officers pursuing a driver who allegedly ran a stop sign.

If police pursuits cause a suspect and officers to drive dangerously, they endanger the public far more than the prospect of any but the most dangerous criminals getting away. — *The editorial board*



The scene of the crash in Middle Island in which three people died.

CHRISTOPHER SABELLA



■ Matt Davies is off. See his cartoons at newsday.com/matt

NEWSDAY/JIMMY MARGULIES

LETTERS

Neeson was telling dangers of racism

Actor Liam Neeson admitted he felt rage and wanted revenge against a random black person after a friend was raped by a black man ["Neeson admits he wanted to kill after friend was raped," Flash!, Feb. 5]. He realized his feelings were wrong after discussion with his priest and some friends and has apologized.

Why is he being criticized? He didn't follow through, and he made his statement voluntarily as a warning to others that racism is wrong.

Until we treat everyone as individuals and not automatically as part of a separate race or class, we will never have peace in this country. Collective guilt on the part of the left or right is a sign of a primitive society; we seem to be reverting to this idea.

*Anthony Coscia,
Bellmore*

Referendum on the wall is a bad idea

A reader's suggestion that we should use Election Day to vote on whether the government should build a border wall seems on the surface to be a logical solution to the inability of our Congress and the president to agree ["Hold a national vote to settle wall question," Letters, Feb. 7].

However, while some referendums are warranted, this one is not a matter for the populace to decide. It is the president's responsibility to protect the American people. He must do everything within his power to fulfill that obligation. Congress must agree to a solution to the border problem that includes a barrier. If not, then the president will have to use other means to ensure the safety of the American people.

*Lawrence J. Beufve,
Lindenhurst*

With all due respect to the reader who suggested holding a national vote to settle the wall question, I'd like to point out that we did that already. It was called the 2016 presidential election.

*Kevin Harrington,
Medford*

As an attorney, I often represent children in Family Court who entered the country illegally. Many are teenagers who fled desperate situations in their home countries that would have caused anyone, including those who loudly condemn such immigrants, to seek refuge wherever possible.

These young people want to work to build lives. They ought to be the backbone of this country, and will be if given a chance. They are by and large the salt of the earth and grateful for the promise of America.