

TRIAL PLAN FOR COP SHIFT CHANGE

Officers meet at 4 Suffolk schools to boost presence

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Suffolk police kicked off a pilot program this week that has officers using neighborhood schools for shift changes, part of a push for improved safety and reduced response time in the event of a mass shooting.

The program, which began Tuesday, is designed to shore up safety at Suffolk campuses by focusing on an increased visual police presence and making officers more familiar with school layouts, officials said.

When department officials came up with the plan, they did

so with mass shootings like the one in February at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in mind, said Suffolk Police Commissioner Geraldine Hart.

The program started at schools patrolled by the Fourth Precinct but eventually will be rolled out to others, Hart said. "We will see how it goes, and if we have any problems we will rectify them and then expand it to other precincts."

Four schools within the Fourth Precinct — one each from the Kings Park, Hauppauge, Sachem and Smithtown districts — are participating in the initial program, officials said, adding that for security reasons, they would not identify the campuses.

Educators from districts participating in the program said they welcomed the opportunity to work closely with police.

"I think it is a good idea for police to be more familiar with our campuses and have their presence at schools become more routine," said Dr. James Grossane, the superintendent of the Smithtown school district.

Dr. Dennis O'Hara, the superintendent of the Hauppauge school district, agreed. "Anything that puts police officers in and around our buildings is an improvement," O'Hara said.

Superintendent Ken Bossert, who oversees the Elwood school district in the Suffolk police department's Second Precinct, said he supports using campuses for officer shift changes as long as the decision is made by educators and administrators.

"It has to be a local decision made by the school district," said Bossert, who also serves as president of the Suffolk County School Superintendents Associ-

ation. "We don't want schools to be assigned to this. It should be a matter of local control."

In August, Suffolk police launched a school safety initiative that included the pilot program as well as highly visible visits from police officers at the 450 public and private grade schools in the department's jurisdiction.

Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone also signed legislation this summer authorizing the county to borrow \$2 million for a smartphone-based emergency alert system so school staffs can instantly alert police and other school personnel during a mass shooting or other emergency.

Nassau officials announced in August that police officers will also make unannounced school visits through the school year. An emergency alert system that provides a direct line from school buildings to police was in-

stalled in Nassau schools earlier this year, officials said.

In another sign of the growing concern over protecting students, teachers and other school staff, hundreds attended a Nassau County school safety forum at Hofstra University last month where the discussion centered on preventing school shootings, the ongoing opioid-addiction crisis, and combating cyberbullying.

In September, Suffolk County Legis. Robert Trotta (R-Fort Salonga) introduced a bill that would require the police department to use schools as "relief points" for shift changes when practical. Trotta, a former Suffolk police detective, said officers have historically depended on firehouses for shift changes.

"If the bill prompted action, that's great," Trotta said. "It doesn't matter who gets credit."

Bill could bring new copter route

BY JEAN-PAUL SALAMANCA
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A bill requiring the Federal Aviation Administration to re-evaluate the North Shore helicopter route — which North Fork residents said has created noise around the area — is heading to President Donald Trump's desk and could be signed into law after the Senate passed the bill Wednesday on a 93-6 vote.

The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018, passed by both the House and Senate, contains legislation that will require the FAA to reassess the North Shore helicopter route and address the noise impact on affected communities, improve altitude enforcement and consider alternatives such as an all-water route over the Atlantic Ocean. The agency would have 30 days to start the route's formal review upon the bill's signing into law.

The FAA would also be required to hold a public hearing on the helicopter route in impacted communities and open a public comment period, both of which must take place within 30 days of the signing of the bill. The public comment period

must last for at least 60 days.

FAA spokesman Jim Peters said Thursday the agency could not comment.

"For years, the FAA has ignored the concerns of residents, from the North Shore route's planning to its continued use, while day-to-day quality of life has suffered due to the persistent issue of helicopter noise on the East End," Rep. Lee Zeldin (R-Shirley) said Wednesday in a statement. "Finally, the FAA is forced to listen. I urge the president to sign this important proposal into law."

John Cullen, 58, a homeowner in the Northville Beach section of Riverhead, said the legislation was a "step in the right direction" in providing relief to both him and his neighbors, who have dealt with noise generated from helicopters flying above their properties at low altitudes because of the North Shore route.

"This last summer was 'the summer of hell,'" said Cullen, a member of the Northville Beach Civic Association, noting double-engine helicopters have sometimes flown over his house around 11 a.m., which he



North Fork residents have complained that the North Shore helicopter route hurts their quality of life.

said "sounded like there was a train coming down the road."

"I'm looking for some peace and quiet when I bought my house [in 2003]. I don't have that anymore," Cullen said.

Cullen said he was hoping the agency would conduct a "fair" study of the route and

consider an all-water helicopter route oriented through the South Shore, or other kinds of all-water options.

Riverhead Supervisor Laura Jens-Smith said Wednesday she urged President Trump "to sign this bill into law, and I hope that this finally leads to relief

for us in Riverhead."

"The East End has had enough. The endless parade of helicopters flying right over our heads is completely eroding our quality of life and threatens our health, safety and welfare," Southold Supervisor Scott Russell said Thursday.