

Mayoral hopefuls debate police review board

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By Timothy McNulty, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Bob O'Connor's opponents in the Democratic primary for Pittsburgh mayor went after him last night on police oversight and other matters.

At a forum hosted by the African-American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania, the candidates were asked if they would compel police officers to testify before Pittsburgh's Citizen Police Review Board about alleged police misconduct.

Mayor Tom Murphy does not require officers to testify and the board, which was created by citywide referendum in 1997, has been largely powerless.

O'Connor's first response to the question was vague, with him saying he would "build bridges" between police and the community. O'Connor also promised to hire more black police officers -- though they are chosen by civil service rules that do not make race a hiring factor.

Another candidate, Michael Lamb, Allegheny County's prothonotary and a lawyer who has worked on police misconduct cases, said he would try to compel officers to testify. He then turned to O'Connor.

"Bob, you've yet to answer this question -- it's been asked to you a number of times at these forums and you still haven't answered the question," Lamb said.

O'Connor then said he would "bring people together" and make sure the board is "diverse" and "professional."

Finally he said "if you ask about testifying, I've been told -- and I've had a lawyer tell me -- that it is illegal to have an officer testify in front of the board. I'm not here to debate that issue. Whatever the law is, I will follow."

The review board sued Murphy in 2000 to force him to compel police testimony at the hearings, by granting officers immunity. An Allegheny County Common Pleas Court judge rejected the board's lawsuit.

Review board officials, however, contend the mayor has the authority to direct police to cooperate.

Candidate Louis "Hop" Kendrick, former Allegheny County disadvantaged business coordinator, said the mayor is the only civilian

citywide with the power to effectively oversee police officers.

"If you have a mayor who coddles the police, they're going to continue to run amok. Bob O'Connor's in bed with the [Fraternal Order of Police] -- he's not going to challenge the FOP," Kendrick said.

Candidate William Peduto, a city councilman, noted that O'Connor, a former councilman, voted against creating the seven-member review board in 1996, while Peduto, as an aide to then-Councilman Dan Cohen, gathered signatures to put the review board referendum on the spring 1997 ballot.

Peduto said he would compel officers to testify as mayor.

Another candidate, Squirrel Hill businessman Les Ludwig, also promised to "stand up to police" if elected mayor.