

Executive Summary

Mayor Fung, Council President Farina, Members of the City Council

It has been my pleasure to serve as Chairperson of the City and School Safety Sub-Committee of the Cranston City Council. I would like to thank the Committee Members:

Councilman Trent Colford
Ward 4

Council Minority Leader Paul Archetto
Ward 3

Council President Michael Farina
City Wide

Chief of Police Col. Michael Winqvist

Superintendent of schools Jeannine Nota-Masse

School Committee Chairperson Janice Ruggieri

Fire Chief William McKenna

Mayor's Chief of Staff, Carlos Lopez

Council Vice President Michael W. Favicchio,
Sub-Committee Chairperson

Many thanks to the members who took time away from their busy schedules to take part in discussions and we appreciated the enthusiastic effort from all involved. Our goal was to do a comprehensive analysis of the current risks associated with all of our schools and City buildings, athletic facilities and playgrounds, and to formulate some short term improvements as well as long term future investment into safety and security for all of our Citizens. This is a collaborative effort by all City departments which will continue to meet in late January to continue discussion of further enhancements to monitor some of the recommendations made.

Four hearings were held, two in executive session and two in a public forum. Discussion of the safety protocols and procedures which have been employed by the school department and the police department were the subject of our first executive session. Because of the sensitive nature of much of the material discussed and prohibition under RI law in disclosing this information our remarks will be limited with regard to this subject but possibly could be disclosed to the full council in an executive session.

Those of us on the City Council were pleased to learn of the extensive amount of work that has been done by our school committee and school administration both independently and in collaboration with the police department. In these disturbing times it is incumbent on all branches of government to be knowledgeable of what goes on in our community and collaborative in our efforts to protect Cranston residents going forward.

A free exchange of ideas was discussed and while some areas of differences emerged some common themes shined. Every member has a great concern for the safety of all Cranston residents. There was a recognition that we have undergone a cultural shift in this country which is difficult to explain. Our tolerance of violence has grown to epic proportions and one can point to many issues.

My personal thoughts relate back to a 1972 Committee established by the United States Senate, to examine the effects of violence in movies and television and its impact on the youth of America. Our great Senator from Rhode Island, John Pastore, believed entertainment was desensitizing our youth to violence. Although he wasn't thinking of the internet and social media at the time, I believe his instincts were correct. And while other factors, such as changing structure of families and other social and economic pressures have given rise to a more violent society in general, our entire community needs to assist in changing this trend while at the same time becoming more active in protecting our citizens, young and old.

Respectfully Submitted


Michael W. Favicchio, Sub-Committee Chairperson

FINDINGS

Our briefing by the School Administration and the Police Department provided detail on the structural risks associated with the thirty school buildings that are operated by the City of Cranston. Discussion of the use of metal detectors, police patrols and communications between school personnel and the police took place. Other areas of concern were what physical alterations could be made to the buildings to provide enhanced protection.

While not getting into great detail the schools have made a sustained and substantial effort to equip our schools with locks and other structural repairs and devices which have made the schools safer. Other safety features employed by the school department are a comprehensive all-hazards school security plan. Coordination between the police and the schools is vital to this effort. In fact the school department and school committee have spent almost one million dollars over the last four years on safety upgrades and continues to search for grant monies and programs to continue this effort.

Another part of our briefing involved disclosure that School Resource Officers have been assigned to duties at the schools. They are integrating with the student population to create a cooperative environment within our schools resulting in a more trusting relationship between students and police. Adding more officers was widely supported although the unanimous opinion was that it would be cost prohibitive to put an officer in every school. Another area of consensus was that current Rhode Island Law prohibits guns and knives from being brought to a school with the exception of law enforcement and other licensed people, and that gun laws are not going to stop an insane or disturbed individual from engaging in violence. Our focus will be on protection and prevention methods regardless of what the state may or may not enact.

During the third meeting conducted in a public forum on Tuesday March 22, 2018, we heard from subject matter speakers. City Wide Councilman Kenneth Hopkins spoke first about the effects of bullying in our schools, especially at the high school level. This thirty- seven year veteran of the school department as an educator, coach and athletic director provided a wealth of information. His testimony revealed that peer pressure among students is greatly heightened by the proliferation of social media as a way of communication. More engagement by police and faculty with the students was advised. Mr. Hopkins also discussed the vulnerability of athletic facilities and the parking lots and walkways which are open to traffic related violence. Mention was made of the use of barriers at CCRI and other state colleges to protect students at schools and at Cranston Stadium. Our Chief of Police, Colonel Michael Winquist, indicated that his department will explore improvements that can be made while maintaining normal safety standards and flow of pedestrian and automotive traffic.

Also speaking were student leaders from Cranston High School East and Cranston High School West. All of them seemed to echo some common themes. Students do not favor metal detectors and police presence, although they said they have had good experiences with the School Resource Officers. They liked the ALICE training for preparedness purposes and indicated that social workers could help with prevention of violence in dealing with mental health issues among students. In that regard the School Superintendent and the Chairperson of the School Committee made suggestions as to hiring of social workers, purchasing badges for High School students and certain upgrades to the existing school buildings. They have recommended adding as many as eight social workers/counselors over the next four years.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There was considerable consensus by the Committee that it is impossible to completely secure all thirty school buildings, City Hall, Cranston Stadium and all other public venues based on the age of our facilities and limited financial resources. What we found is that there are some short term efforts that can be made as well as more long term goals.

First the committee found that certain measures, such as metal detectors are logistically impossible at our schools and athletic facilities, based primarily on the fact that there is a tremendous amount of foot traffic between buildings at the schools, City Hall and Cranston Stadium. There are many open spaces creating vulnerability which cannot be dealt with by the use of these devices.

As a result of the meetings and findings of the committee the City Council, during budget adoption, added resources to allow the police department to provide two more full time shifts to the school resource officers currently working in the schools bringing the number to six. While this is a small contingent the added officers will increase efforts at the schools. The interaction with students as well as faculty is helpful in preparing everyone associated in the unfortunate situations and should help to prevent violent incidents on our campuses. Our police department has also implemented practices that decrease and enhance response time to threats at schools and other City facilities.

In addition, the Council appropriated one hundred thirteen thousand dollars in additional funding which the Superintendent of Schools, Jeannine Nota-Masse and School Committee Chairwoman Janice Ruggieri, indicated that they would use for social workers/counselors to create a new effort addressing student problems, such as bullying and mental health issues. More money and resources are needed to provide preventative measures to combat a rapidly changing environment of violence in the United States.

Some of the long term goals discussed by the Committee were planning for building new and efficient structures geared to the emerging need for greater technological infrastructure and safety features. This will be a major task and require a considerable contribution of financial resources from all levels of federal, state and local government, as well as taxpayers. This also includes City buildings and athletic facilities and as such, the committee will need to meet more regularly to devise creative solutions to these problems. In light of some recent monies being earmarked for school buildings some of the physical improvements can be made sooner rather than later.

In addition, more training of faculty students and staff are needed to prevent the root causes of violence occurring on public property, including schools, city facilities, playgrounds and other buildings. Perhaps some more defined training in the schools to enhance student awareness of bullying and its effects, as well as outside influence and abnormal behavior. More frequent ALICE program sessions and interaction with our Resource Officers would provide additional education in combating these problems.

Respectfully Submitted



Michael W Favicchio, Chairperson
On behalf of the Committee