

# Board talks of closing its proceedings

Members say  
appeals suffer.

**BY BRENNAN DAVID**

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The Citizens Police Review Board last night spent its meeting formulating a request to the Columbia City Council asking for the ability to have closed sessions. The board approved the request but then reversed course and rescinded the motion and decided to revisit the issue at its April meeting.

Review board members said negative attention generated by news stories makes appellants fearful of testifying before the board.

"How do we encourage the public to participate if everything about them becomes public news the next day?" asked board member Susan Smith. "After the" Derek "Billups case, I don't know how many would want to walk through what he did. As I read the newspaper and some of the articles that were written about him personally and the comments written, they were just scathing."

Betty Wilson cast the sole vote against the original motion to ask the council to make the review board subject to the Sunshine Law, which provides provisions for closing public meetings. The review board was founded on the principle that all of its proceed-

ings would be open.

Board members said they understand the need for appellants to feel comfortable, which is why they prefer a Kansas City police oversight committee's strategy that allows for open and closed sessions upon the request of the complainant.

"It's a tough situation because one of the concerns of the oversight committee was that there was no openness by Columbia police. They never really heard what was going on," said Chairwoman Ellen LoCurto-Martinez. "Part of the reason why the oversight committee was so insistent on everything being open and no executive session was because we did not want" the same perception.

Moving into closed session also could settle a request by the police department that the city provide legal representation for officers during hearings for liability reasons. Chief Ken Burton and the Columbia Police Officers Association made the formal request last month, and spokeswoman Sgt. Jill Wieneke said the move could ease officers' apprehension to cooperate. Burton currently requires officers to testify to the board if called upon.

"I think the issue with attorneys would be fixed by going into closed session," Wieneke said.

Some residents in attendance scolded the board for its move seeking closed sessions. Soon

after, Carroll Highbarger, John McClure and Stephen Alexander said they wanted to change their votes "upon recollection of the spirit of the ordinance."

The board voted to revisit the issue at its April 13 meeting.

Some board members have taken issue over the past year with its high standard of openness and the problems it can create. Wilson last night referred to a recent meeting when board members concluded closed-session meetings could solve some of the board's reluctance to form committees. Alexander at the same meeting said the open nature of meetings allows for public condemnation of the board, which he said has been difficult to handle over the past year.

Also last night the board:

► Reaffirmed appeals by Leila Cruz and Sandra Lovelace. The appellants were not in attendance for their hearings. None of the witnesses called to testify last night for Lovelace's appeal was present except the officer in question.

► Discussed and moved closer to establishing a triage process of assigning and defining complaints and a mediation process through discussion with a Kansas City police oversight committee.

► Rescheduled its initial appeal of David Riley for its April meeting.

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