

South Whitehall commissioners quiet on police shooting, 'out of respect for the process'

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FULL TEXT

Five miles from a protest over the death of Joseph Santos, the leadership of South Whitehall Township said they won't make any statement about the police shooting and the investigation.

Commissioner President Christina Tori Morgan said "out of respect for the process" the police chief's comments at Wednesday's municipal meeting would be the only ones from the township body.

Any other comments by commissioners do not reflect the views of township leadership, she said.

Only Commissioner Mark Pinsley, who is running for state office, has commented on the shooting. He's called for Lehigh County District Attorney Jim Martin to recuse himself from the probe and attended Wednesday evening's vigil and march along Hamilton Boulevard.

South Whitehall police Chief Glen Dorney called on the public to reserve judgment and respect the investigative process.

In addition to the state police and district attorney's probe into the shooting, Dorney said his department is conducting its own internal investigation to determine whether the officer followed department protocol.

"I have the utmost confidence in the Pennsylvania State Police and the Lehigh County district attorney's office and assure you that a thorough and unbiased investigation will occur," Dorney said. "Our thoughts and prayers are with Mr. Santos' family and the police officer involved in this tragic incident, as well as his family. This has touched more than just two people, so please keep everyone in your thoughts and prayers."

The meeting was the first time leaders in the township gathered since the Saturday shooting that killed Santos, 44, of Hasbrouck Heights, N.J., across the street from Dorney Park and Wildwater Kingdom.

There was no crowd at the South Whitehall meeting. The roughly 15-person turnout is not atypical of a commissioner meeting.

The most glaring difference was the increase in law enforcement. Squad cars from South Whitehall and Upper Macungie Township police were parked at the building. A South Whitehall policeman stood by the commissioners' dais throughout the meeting, watching the audience.

The official township silence on the shooting didn't stop three in the audience from approaching the microphone during public comment.

Chris Cocca, a South Whitehall resident who grew up in the township and serves as a pastor in Lowhill Township, said he wondered if the increasing diversity of the area is reflected in the township police department.

The township should be mindful of maintaining a police force that represents those it protects, Cocca said, particularly in the section of the township where Santos was killed, an area full of out-of-town visitors and Allentown residents.

Julie Thomases, a west Allentown woman associated with the nonprofit human rights group Leadership Power LV, called on South Whitehall to establish better use-of-force training, Spanish language skills and an independently funded citizen review board to hold law enforcement accountable during incidents of abuse.

"We see the death of Joseph Santos as the spark needed to enact reforms to our criminal justice system so that Mr. Santos can leave behind a legacy of justice and racial equity for all residents," Thomases said.

Dan Poresky, an Allentown resident, mentioned the July 19 arrest of a machete-wielding man who pointed a

shotgun at police and tossed Molotov cocktails toward officers during a standoff in Easton. The suspect, 27-year-old Jeffrey Folkner Jr. was white, Poresky noted.

"Compare that with what happened to Joseph Santos," he said. "Think about if he was white. Now that's the message that people of color in the community see."

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