



Everything Jersey

Cop's behavior at meeting puzzling

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TRENTON - The police department's South Ward district commander was belligerent, disrespectful and voiced his annoyance at concerned citizens at a community meeting in Dunn Middle School Monday evening, a city activist and two residents charged yesterday.

Police officials say they are looking into the allegations.

Lt. Paul Messina, commander of Charlie District - the South Ward - was ultimately asked to leave the meeting by South Ward activist Juan Martinez, who chairs the monthly Dunn meetings.

Martinez said Messina was a bully, verbally abusive to parents of school students and local residents who wanted to talk about crime issues and school safety, and angrily barked an obscenity when he was asked to leave.

Martinez said he filed a complaint with the department, and wants action against Messina.

"It was pretty bad," Martinez said yesterday. Martinez, who said he's worked with Messina before, said he was "puzzled" by the lieutenant's behavior.

An attempt to reach Messina yesterday was unsuccessful, but police spokesman Lt. Joseph Juniak confirmed that the department had received a complaint about Messina stemming from the meeting, and it will be investigated by the department's internal affairs unit.

Juniak declined to discuss the meeting or Messina. He would only say that the complaint would be investigated, "to see if what has been alleged took place."

Martinez organized the meetings several months ago following publicized incidents of youth fighting and other violence at Dunn so that parents, local residents, school administrators and police could regularly talk about a variety of issues, inside the school and out.

Martinez said Messina was invited to the meeting March 12 and was sent a description of his role and participation, and Messina responded via e-mail one week later that he would attend.

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But Martinez said Messina appeared annoyed at the beginning, and then refused to be on the agenda of speakers. When questioned by the audience, he pointed his finger at one, raised his voice and was extremely gruff with his responses, Martinez said.

Vickie Olvera of Chambers Street said Messina got angry and intimidating with her when she wanted to talk about ongoing crime problems, even though the meeting was at a school.

"I went to discuss it with him he was basically cutting me off," Olvera said. She said Messina growled that she should bring "facts, not he said-she said" to the meeting.

"He was kind of rude to me and belittled me and made me look like I didn't know what I was talking about," Olvera said.

"He just didn't want to be part of the solution," Olvera said. "A good 10 of us walked out mad." She estimated about 40 to 50 people attended.

Mary Lou Everett of Anderson Street and Martinez both said the exchange with Olvera was shocking for a public official.

"He was very rude to her," said Everett, who also attended to talk about crime issues around her home involving young people.

"I've dealt with (Messina) before and he has a tendency that he can't be bothered," Everett said.

Martinez said he asked Messina to leave, the two had a heated argument, Messina cursed at him and refused to leave.

Martinez said he questioned Messina as to why he was acting so rudely, saying essentially, "Lieutenant, this is a community meeting," he recalled.

Everett and Olvera said they could not hear exactly what Martinez and Messina were saying to each other, but it was obvious they were arguing, and that Messina's behavior was baffling.

Everett said she did overhear Martinez say something like, "You can't talk to these people like this."

"He's supposed to be here to help us, and I can see why with his attitude, nothing out here is getting done," Everett said.

One city official who was present but declined to have to be identified publicly, said of Messina, "When you're a ranking member of any city department, you're a public servant, you should be prepared to speak. That's part of the job." NOTE: Kevin Shea can be reached at policedesk@njtimes.com

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