

Taser suspension defeated

After some highly charged debate, council voted down the call to suspend their use.

By PATRICK MALONEY, SUN MEDIA

A proposal to suspend the use of tasers by London police was narrowly defeated at city council last night, but not before a heated debate about the powerful stun guns.

Those supporting Coun. David Winninger's call for a moratorium on the weapons, pending more evidence on their safety, called it progressive and overdue.

But critics hammered the move as political posturing that insults police officers.

"I, as a councillor, do not want to be funding a weapon whose safety hasn't been proven," Winninger said.

"I didn't want to have it on my conscience that, if the Taser is a potential risk . . . that I didn't stand up and question that."

Winninger was motivated by the recent death of Polish immigrant Robert Dziekanski at the Vancouver airport, but also mentioned the 2004 death of Londoner Peter Lamonday, who died shortly after being Tasered by police at a Hamilton Road variety store.

His motion asked for the city's police services board to consider temporarily suspending the use of the increasingly controversial stun guns, which the manufacturer, Taser International, calls less-lethal. It was voted down, 10-8.

Winninger's comments sparked a fierce response from several councillors, including Roger Caranci, who called it "nothing more than political opportunism at its best."

Controller Gord Hume, who sits on the police board, called it a "shocking political ploy" that he found "disgusting." He noted only senior London officers carry Tasers.

"This is the kind of motion that drives people crazy," Hume said. "This is not our business. Council should not be dealing with this (issue)."

That was rebuked by Coun. Susan Eagle, who noted the police board "is not a sacred cow. We can send recommendations to (it) as we can to any board."

While Coun. Harold Usher didn't support the motion, he applauded Winninger for bringing it forward and chided fellow councillors for harshly reacting to the idea.

"I'm really appalled that any of us would criticize them, practically insult them, for bringing a motion like this," he said of Winninger and Controller Gina Barber, who supported the moratorium bid.

Lamonday's case made Taser use a hot-button issue in London three years ago, his death resulting in a high-profile coroner's inquest.

The London man was high on cocaine when police encountered him on a violent rampage outside a 7-Eleven on May 14, 2004. He was Tasered three times and died 50 minutes later, in hospital.

At the inquest, Ontario's deputy chief coroner, Jim Cairns, said that time delay is proof the 50,000-volt Taser shot didn't cause his death. In the end, the inquest recommended more police be armed with the stun guns.

But Cairns's relationship with manufacturer Taser International now is under scrutiny following a report the Arizona-based company paid for him to travel to two conferences as a guest lecturer.