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Taser moratorium rejected

A city councillor's appeal got short shrift from the police board.

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A London city councillor made a last-ditch effort Dec. 13 to get a moratorium on the use of Tasers by city police.

But Coun. David Winninger's bid garnered little reaction from the police services board.

Citing recent high-profile deaths, Winninger appealed to the board to stop police from using the guns until they're studied further.

"Whether I'm successful or not in persuading you (to impose a moratorium on Taser use in London), my conscience is clear that I've done what I can," Winninger said.

"I think we need to look at new procedures."

The move came a day after the Commission for Complaints Against the RCMP said the 50,000-volt Taser should only be used in touch-stun or firing mode when suspects are "combative" or pose a risk of "death or grievous bodily harm."

Paul Kennedy, head of the commission, cited "usage creep" as a major concern warranting immediate action, but fell short of calling for a moratorium.

While Winninger said he agreed with the commission's recommendations, "I don't think they go far enough."

Winninger failed to convince the majority of council to back a motion calling for a moratorium on Tasers, losing a 10-8 vote on Dec. 3.

Dec. 13, he cited a litany of incidents in which people died after being Tasered or in which use of the device by police was questionable.

The recent death of Polish immigrant Robert Dziekanski at the Vancouver airport after being Tasered "galvanized my (determination) to do what I can to urge the board to take a pause while (waiting for) results of an independent study on their use," Winninger said.

He also mentioned the 2004 death of Londoner Peter Lamonday, who died shortly after being Tasered by police at a Hamilton Road variety store.

And Winninger pointed to the case of Edmonton family lawyer Brian Fish, who claims he was Tasered three times by police for trying to videotape police tactics in quelling rowdy hockey fans after the Edmonton Oilers' win in the sixth game of the Stanley Cup finals in 2006.

"That family lawyer could be me," Winninger said.

In response, police Chief Murray Faulkner defended the use of Tasers, saying they're regulated by the province and their use policed by the Special Investigations Unit.

"I think what needs to happen in cases where we think a police officer uses a level of force inappropriately, that's a disciplinary issue," Faulkner said.

As an example, Faulkner pointed to the 1991 videotaped beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police with nightsticks.

"You deal with the police officers," said Faulkner. "You don't take the nightstick away from all other police officers."

Faulkner said there are circumstances in which the Taser is used when a person is unarmed but could still cause harm to others. As well, police have used a Taser to stop people from jumping off balconies in suicide bids.

Regardless, Mayor Anne Marie DeCicco-Best said the board doesn't have the power to restrict the use of Tasers.

After the meeting, Winninger said the board's muted response was what he expected and that he was satisfied with the explanation of Taser use in London.

"But that doesn't allay my concerns," he said. "There's a lot of unanswered questions."

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