

OPINION

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EDITORIAL

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Police Guild complaint about chief rings hollow

So what should the public think of the Spokane Police Guild's no-confidence vote for Chief Anne Kirkpatrick and her administration? Not much.

When the union thinks it has a story that should worry the general public, it will release the tallies. In the meantime, there isn't much to go on. Guild President Ernie Wuthrich, a Spokane police detective, says the trust level of officers is "at an all-time low."

Was that voted upon, or is it spin from a union that isn't enamored of a boss who tries to hold officers accountable? Secret results and self-serving analysis just aren't persuasive.

Meanwhile, the Lieutenants and Captains Association gave Kirkpatrick a vote of approval. "We have confidence in the leadership and the direction that it's going," said Capt. Steve Braun.

So what's this dust-up all about?

"There's a perception at the line level, and at the supervisor's level, about what's broken and what's the best remedy. ... These types of issues occur in any type of organization that has the number of employees that we do," Braun said.

Sounds like the typical friction between bosses and workers.

Braun went on to say that he's worked for seven chiefs and Kirkpatrick is the best. "I just don't see a personal agenda in her," he said.

Maybe that's the problem. By not taking sides, she's rankled one side. Guild leaders note that members

don't like the way Kirkpatrick handles officer-involved incidents. They list examples of officers who were not charged with crimes or who were reinstated after suspensions and suggest that these internal investigations weren't needed to begin with.

But that's like saying police officers' investigations of civilians aren't merited if they don't result in charges or convictions, or if convictions are overturned. Yes, allegations of wrongdoing can harm police officers. They can harm civilians, too. The larger issue is whether police officers are upholding their paramount duty of protecting the public without cutting corners or ignoring established protocols. Effective law enforcement requires voluntary compliance from citizens, so building the public's trust is important.

We're confident that officers use good judgment most of the time. If that is true, then they shouldn't be so defensive about oversight. Guild members, it seems, would like the benefit of the doubt. Who wouldn't? But the chief needs to balance internal morale concerns with the city's historically anemic oversight of police officers' actions. It's what prompted the disbanding of the citizens review board and the hiring of a professional ombudsman.

The public likes the changes. So do elected officials. The chief answers to both.

If the principle of accountability creates an untenable work environment, then the solution is simple: Turn in the badge and go work for a more accommodating police department.

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