

## **Police Commission seeks further study of stun guns**

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Some San Francisco police officers may be armed with Tasers under a convoluted measure approved by the Police Commission on a 6-1 vote after a contentious six-hour hearing.

"I think we owe this to our citizens and officers," said Thomas Mazzucco, the commission's president.

Almost 50 people spoke before the commission Wednesday night, almost all of them opposed to the use of electric stun guns. The weapons, they argued, were not only potentially deadly, but also much more likely to be used against minorities, the poor and the mentally ill.

"Tasers are a symbol of police misconduct," said David Waggoner of the Harvey Milk LGBT Democratic Club.

### **Careful phrasing**

Unlike the commission's 4-3 vote in March to bar the use of electric stun guns, Wednesday night's action was so cautiously phrased that commissioners later disagreed on what they actually had approved.

The original measure called for an up or down vote to allow interim Chief Jeff Godown to develop a plan to equip officers with stun guns, which he argued would be "another tool in the toolbox" that would allow officers to disable suspects without having to shoot them.

But after a series of hastily drawn amendments, the final version called for the

chief, two members of the commission and a representative of the Office of Citizen Complaints to study stun guns and other nonlethal weapons and return to the commission in 90 days with a proposal to either dump the stun gun plan or begin a pilot program to test the new weapon.

Commissioner Angela Chan, who voted for the plan with reservations, argued Thursday that the commission must hold another full-fledged hearing before any pilot program can be approved.

"More homework has to be done before we make a final decision, or it's irresponsible," she said in an interview. "Just because we had a six-hour discussion doesn't mean we have all the information we need."

That's not going to happen, Mazzucco said.

"We're not going to do that again," he said in an interview Thursday. "If so, why did we have the hearing last night?"

The vote was "a green light for the chief to put together a pilot program," Mazzucco added. If the chief comes back and says that stun guns are the best option for the department, "we just have to vote on implementation."

## **Victory for advocates**

Regardless of what happens in the future, Wednesday's vote was a win for advocates of the stun guns, which police argue are needed to fill the gap between arms-length weapons such as batons and pepper spray and the deadly force of a police handgun.

"There's a real need for police to have a different weapon, and if people don't like that, I'm sorry," said Commissioner James Hammer.

But when police have stun guns, they are used much too often, said John Burton, a Pasadena attorney who has sued Arizona-based Taser International over the misuse of the weapons it sells.

"Tasers tend to be used in situations far, far below what would call for drawing a

firearm, much less discharging it," he said.

Commissioner Petra DeJesus, the lone vote against the stun gun plan, argued that the weapons were too expensive and too dangerous, and "would have a disproportionate impact on minorities being targeted."

The resolution approved Wednesday "is a soft-pitch way to authorize Tasers," she complained.

## **Memphis' stance**

More than 800 California police and public safety agencies use stun guns, including the San Francisco Sheriff's Department. Among big-city police departments, only Memphis, Detroit and San Francisco bar the use of the stun guns.

The anti-stun-gun forces received a boost two weeks ago when a former Memphis police official told the commission that his department decided against the devices years ago because of safety concerns and has never seen a reason to reconsider that stand.

That view carries extra weight because the commission voted unanimously to adopt the Tennessee city's nationally lauded plan for dealing with mentally disturbed suspects in a way that minimized violence.

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