

BRPD officer with controversial past faces calls for resignation from civil service board

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Criminal justice reform advocates are calling for the chair of Baton Rouge's police and firefighter civil service board to resign, arguing the longtime BRPD officer has a problematic background.

The advocates, members of **Together Baton Rouge**, have seized on controversial elements of Cpl. Robert Moruzzi's past, including when he was fired from the department in 2010 and later reinstated after fighting a downtown Baton Rouge bar manager — and when a federal court ruled in 2016 that he used excessive force during a drug raid.



Those incidents are no secret. Both received extensive media coverage. But the current national climate surrounding police reform has sparked heightened concern about officer misconduct.

Moruzzi said he won't resign unless his fellow officers want him to.

Leaders of Together Baton Rouge claim his continued presence on the board, which reviews discipline cases for police and firefighters, sends the wrong message: that such proceedings are "more about protecting officers than keeping the public safe."

The calls for his resignation also add to existing tensions between some Baton Rouge leaders — including the mayor and police chief — and the police union, which was instrumental in getting Moruzzi elected to the board in 2015.

Moruzzi said he takes his role as board member seriously and strives for "equality and fairness while preserving employees' rights." His current term ends next month, at which point the department can decide whether he should continue serving or be replaced.

"Everyone should be held accountable for their actions," he said in a statement Tuesday. "The civil service board ensures that those who deserve a second chance are given one."

The board consists of five members who are appointed for three-year volunteer terms, including one each from the city's police and fire departments. Those agencies vote their representatives into the position, while the other three slots are reserved for members of the public: one appointed by the parish Metro Council and the remaining two nominated by local universities, in this case Southern and LSU.

In addition to overseeing hiring and promotions for police and firefighters, the board has the power to uphold or overturn discipline decisions if the officer involved files an appeal, which means potentially reversing suspensions or terminations. However, meeting minutes over the past several years reveal that the board sides with the chiefs more often than not.

The board received heightened attention in the aftermath of the 2016 Alton Sterling shooting when the officer responsible, Blane Salamoni, appealed his termination. He later reached a settlement with the department, allowing both parties to avoid a public appeal hearing.

Baton Rouge Mayor-President Sharon Weston Broome has repeatedly encouraged the public to attend civil service hearings and gain a better understanding of how officer discipline often unfolds before the board. She reiterated that point during a recent radio interview and called the union an obstructive force in her efforts to weed out "bad cops" in Baton Rouge.

Union leadership has refuted Broome's criticism and emphasized the group's support of recent reforms.

When asked about his election to the board, Moruzzi told The Advocate in 2018 that union leaders had suggested he should run. He said he brought the perspective of an officer who had gone through

the department's discipline process — and that he appreciated the support he had received from the union following his 2010 termination.

A Marine Corps veteran, Moruzzi joined BRPD in 2008. He now serves in the department's Air Support division.

He was fired in 2010 following an off-duty fight on Third Street where he was accused of pulling a gun on a bar manager, but later negotiated his job back and was allowed to return.

In the months before he joined the civil service board in summer 2015, Moruzzi was facing two federal lawsuits alleging excessive force, court records show.

One of the suits — which claimed he fired a Taser at an intoxicated LSU student who was resisting medical treatment — was ultimately dismissed. The second resulted in the 2016 ruling that awarded \$25,000 in damages to the plaintiff.

The jury in that case found Moruzzi used excessive force on Brett Percle, 24, whose teeth were knocked out during a drug raid in 2014 that never resulted in his arrest. Moruzzi was accused of stomping on the man's shoulders, slamming his head into the ground with enough force to knock out several teeth. Moruzzi has consistently denied those allegations.

The calls for his resignation came after longtime former board member Julie Cherry tried to get reappointed earlier this year but received pushback because of her job as secretary-treasurer of Louisiana's AFL-CIO, a labor union federation. Before the Metro Council voted on whether to appoint her, a letter written by the police chief's attorney was sent to some council members claiming Cherry's job amounted to a conflict of interest because of the union bent.

The council ultimately chose Gayle Joseph instead. She's a former Metro Council member and longtime public servant who currently volunteers for Together Baton Rouge. She told The Advocate earlier this year that Broome suggested she apply to join the civil service board.

Together Baton Rouge leaders said Tuesday they don't believe Joseph's involvement with the organization could impact how she rules on officer discipline cases.

Another new addition to the board is Sharon Lewis, who's an LSU assistant athletic director focusing on football recruiting efforts. She was appointed by the university.

The board's next meeting will be held at 9:30 a.m. Thursday at the Baton Rouge Fire Department headquarters. The initial agenda included a disciplinary appeal hearing for Marshall McDermitt, who was fired from the department last summer after video footage surfaced showing him in uniform beating a man outside a Tigerland bar. But officials sent an updated agenda Tuesday evening that indicated the hearing had been postponed.

Jennifer Carwile, a member of Together Baton Rouge focusing on criminal justice reform, said it's inappropriate for Moruzzi to rule on cases that involve accusations similar to those he's faced in the past.

"The optics are bad," she said. "He needs to step down. Now is the time."