

 Click to Print

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Legislator squares off with police

Friday, February 20, 2009

Last updated: Friday February 20, 2009, 8:55 AM

BY WILLIAM LAMB

NorthJersey.com

STAFF WRITER

An assemblyman from Bergen County is pushing a personal vendetta by sponsoring legislation to disband the Palisades Interstate Parkway Police Department, which has stopped the lawmaker's son at least five times since 2005, a union official alleges.

Assemblyman John Rooney, R-Northvale, has acknowledged that his son's run-ins with the department, including one stop in 2005 that ended with a guilty plea to a weapons charge, motivated him to seek the abolition of the 25-member force and shift its responsibilities to the Bergen County Police Department.

Rooney testified in Trenton in December that his son's brushes with parkway officers could justify a personal "grudge" against the department. He added that the experience exposed him to a pattern of aggressive policing that has been supported by complaints from constituents, particularly minorities.

"Somebody might say that I have a grudge," Rooney said. "Well, if that's true, I think it's a grudge that's realistically earned, and what we're looking at is an agency that's out of control and has been out of control. They seem to make the laws on their own."

Palisades Interstate Parkway Commission officials deny those allegations. Patrolman Fabricio Salazar, president of Local 388 of the New Jersey State Policemen's Benevolent Association, said Rooney is trying to punish parkway officers for doing their jobs.

"This gentleman, Mr. John Rooney, has a personal agenda, a vendetta, because we acted as a professional law enforcement agency," Salazar said. "I feel that we're being picked on by this gentleman because of that, and it just happens to be his son. I have kids. No one wants to see their kids in trouble with the law, and I can see his point of view on this. But at the same time, why would you blame us for doing our jobs?"

Rooney's 38-year-old son, Patrick, has been stopped on the parkway at least five times since July 2005. On Nov. 7 of that year, he was pulled over for speeding and for driving with an expired state inspection sticker on his pickup truck. Officers stopped him 11 days later, again for driving with an expired inspection sticker. A search of his car yielded cocaine, marijuana, drug paraphernalia and two loaded BB guns, according to the arrest report.

The drug charges later were dismissed. Patrick Rooney pleaded guilty to a weapons charge and a probation violation.

Debate over savings

John Rooney's personal history with the department, which he has made no effort to hide, has in recent weeks come to dominate the debate over its future. Rooney says that the move would save

the state as much as \$2 million annually and that the Bergen County Police Department is better equipped to patrol the parkway. The yearly budget for the parkway police budget is \$2.5 million.

But parkway commission and police union officials say that replacing the department's 24 officers and chief with about 15 new county police officers would make park visitors and parkway drivers less safe. The move also is not likely to save money, they say, because the top salary for a parkway officer is about \$71,000 annually, compared with \$109,000 for a Bergen County Police Department officer.

Patrick Rooney was pulled over on the parkway most recently on July 9, allegedly for driving with a suspended license.

Through a public-records request, The Record obtained a video recording from the dashboard camera of the police cruiser that officers used to take him from the parkway to police headquarters in Alpine. John Rooney does not appear on camera, but can be heard telling Detective Sgt. Michael Coppola that he has "no respect" for the parkway police after he arrived at police headquarters to pay his son's \$42 bail on an outstanding traffic warrant out of Palisades Park.

"If you want to make an enemy, that's fine," Rooney is heard saying. "I will do the best I can to make sure that you guys don't continue this, because — "

Coppola interjects: "Continue what? Writing suspended [license] violations in accordance with the law?"

"No, harassing people," Rooney says.

Rooney confirmed that it is his voice on the tape.

"They can take it for whatever it was worth," he said. "These guys have been after him continually. It's always the same cops who pull him over. They know his truck. So what can I tell you?"

Complaints of bias

The Palisades Interstate Parkway Police Department patrols about 11.5 miles of parkway and about 2,500 acres of parkland from the George Washington Bridge north to the New York State line. (The New York State Police patrol an additional 41 miles of parkway north of the state border.)

Rooney said his bill would do away with a "rogue group" that has been the target of complaints filed with his office about racially motivated harassment

"I've had complaints from every minority community," he testified at the Dec. 8 hearing. "We've had the African-American community, the Hispanic community, the Hasidics, the Orthodox. The gays have complained to our offices about the treatment received."

James F. Hall, the parkway commission's executive director, denies that the department unfairly targets any group, adding that bias complaints have dropped significantly since video cameras were installed in the department's cruisers about a year ago.

Ingrid W. Reed, a policy analyst at Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute of Politics, said Rooney would be better off calling for a formal review of complaints against the department before trying to legislate it out of existence.

"The thing that's behind this bill is one representative's personal experience and anecdotal evidence that he says he has, but has not been examined in a rigorous way," Reed said. "So you can imagine that some members of the Legislature would say that's not enough evidence to make a big decision, like moving [responsibility for] policing a well-traveled section from one institution to another

institution."

Reed said Rooney should acknowledge that "he probably isn't in a good position to be objective."

"Therefore, it's even more important for him to call for a review," she said. "Is his experience with his son unique, or part of a pattern? You can't really be impartial and serve the public when you're emotionally involved."

Initial bill shelved

Rooney, a former mayor of Northvale, and Assemblyman Gordon Johnson, D-Englewood, first introduced a bill to disband the department in November. The bill also called for the parkway commission's court to be closed and jurisdiction for parkway violations shifted to Bergen County's municipal court system.

Johnson estimated at the time that the state would save as much as \$2.1 million the first year after the measure was enacted.

The bill revived a debate over whether it makes sense for Bergen County to maintain its own police department when the county already is patrolled by 68 municipal departments, a sheriff's department and a county prosecutor's office. The county department, which has a budget of nearly \$12.5 million this year, is primarily responsible for patrolling Routes 4, 17 and 46, as well as some smaller county roads and county parks.

Johnson abruptly shelved the bill on Jan. 15 and replaced it with a more modest measure setting a one-year deadline for parking upgrades and other improvements to the parkway commission's court building in Alpine.

Johnson said he pulled the bill because he is no longer certain that the measure would save as much money as he initially expected.

The Palisades Interstate Parkway Commission takes in about \$1.7 million in revenue annually from its Alpine court — money that would go directly to Bergen County if Rooney's bill became law. The parkway commission currently uses that money to offset the \$2.5 million annual cost of running its police department — a figure that Hall said did not include benefits and pension plan contributions. The commission makes up the difference with a portion of the \$2.7 million appropriation it receives from the state every year and other revenues, including gas station concessions and parking fees, Hall said.

On Jan. 26, Rooney submitted a new version of Johnson's original bill, this time as the sole sponsor. Johnson said he would sign on to Rooney's bill as a co-sponsor if the state Treasury Department and Governor Corzine determine that it would make economic sense to do away with the parkway police. Bergen County officials have said they would agree to have the county police assume responsibility for patrolling the parkway only if the state comes up with more than \$2 million to defray the cost of hiring 15 new officers and other expenses.

Supporters say there would still be a substantial savings, estimating that the overall cost of running the parkway police department exceeds \$3.5 million annually when pension plan contributions and other benefit costs are factored in.

Johnson said he was aware of Rooney's personal history with the department when Rooney signed on as a sponsor of the original bill in November.

"I realized that he had some personal issues involved with this, and I also believe there's some

emotional attachment for him with this bill," Johnson said. "I feel John Rooney is a good legislator, but he's also human."

Johnson added that Patrick Rooney's troubles with the parkway police were "just another factor that opened the door to what's going on there."

Harassment denied

Hall has said he does not believe it would be cost-effective for the Legislature to disband the department. He also dismissed Rooney's allegations that the department's officers routinely harass motorists.

"Legislators all the time have a point of view, and they have every right to assert it in the legislative process," Hall said. "Whether it has merit or not is what the legislative process is supposed to sort out. In this particular case, I don't think it has merit."

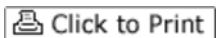
Under the state's conflict of interest law, legislators are barred from casting votes on matters in which they have a "personal interest." However, the law says a legislator is considered to have a "personal interest" in any bill only when the legislator or an immediate family member stands to gain or lose financially from the outcome.

"If they want to call it a conflict of interest, let them call it a conflict of interest," Rooney said. "I don't have a financial interest, I don't have anything that really benefits me personally. Does it make me happy? Yeah, to basically know there are problems out there and to get rid of the problems. I am excited at the possibility that that could happen. That's what any legislator does — look at examples in his own experience and listen to the examples of others, and try to do something about it."

E-mail: lamb@northjersey.com

Find this article at:

<http://www.northjersey.com/news/njpolitics/rooney022009.html>



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.