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POLITICS

Minneapolis Vote on Eliminating Police Department Puts Democrats on Edge

November initiative to replace police department with public safety agency could provide Republicans fodder for 2022 elections



Police in Minneapolis last year during protests over the death of George Floyd.

PHOTO: JOHN MINCHILLO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By [John McCormick](#)

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SAVAGE, Minn—Residents in this Minneapolis suburb won't get to vote on a ballot question in November that seeks to eliminate Minnesota's largest police department, but some say the issue may influence their votes in next year's midterm elections.

The proposed change, pushed by local and national progressives in response to the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020, could offer Republicans both in the state and nationally fresh fodder to argue Democrats are soft on crime and anti-police.

Some top Minnesota Democrats, fearing they'll again be hurt by being labeled as the party of the "defund the police" movement, are distancing themselves from a proposal that would replace the Minneapolis Police Department with a new agency that would emphasize a public health approach over traditional law-enforcement tactics.

The proposal, at a time of rising crime in the city, is dividing Minnesota Democrats. Gov. Tim Walz, Sen. Amy Klobuchar and Rep. Angie Craig, whose district includes Savage, expressed opposition late last month, while Rep. Ilhan Omar, a progressive Democrat

whose district includes Minneapolis, supports the ballot initiative.

Instructions on the ballot are expected to explain that the new agency, if approved, could include police officers “if necessary.” Supporters say officers would focus on violent crime, while other responders would target mental health, addiction and homelessness.



A memorial to George Floyd in Minneapolis. His death sparked a move to rethink law enforcement in the city.

PHOTO: BRANDON BELL/GETTY IMAGES

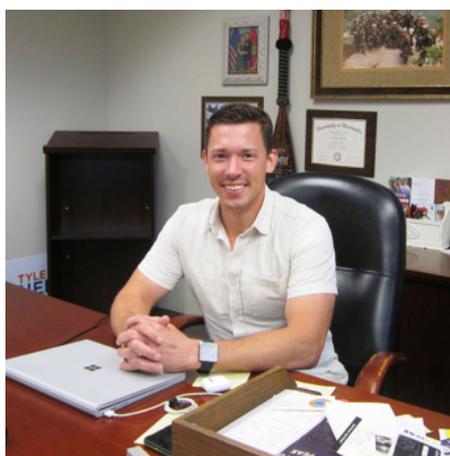
“It’s a terrible idea,” said Darren McGann, a 55-year-old resident of Savage. The former suburban police officer, who considers himself politically independent, says he is no longer willing to travel into Minneapolis after dark because of increased crime there. “The left has really pushed this agenda and we are heading for a dangerous place.”

Savage, which has more than 32,000 residents and its own police department, is located about 15 miles south of Minneapolis in Minnesota’s Second Congressional District. The district was the state’s most competitive last year and is one of 57 nationwide held by Democrats that Republicans are targeting for 2022.

Among the district’s largest cities, Savage had the narrowest margin between the Democratic and Republican congressional candidates in 2020, election results show. In the city, less than 1 percentage point separated Ms. Craig from Republican challenger Tyler Kistner, a pairing that is expected to face off again next year.



U.S. Representative Angie Craig. PHOTO: MICHAEL BROCHSTEIN/ZUMA PRESS



Republican Tyler Kistner. PHOTO: JOHN MCCORMICK/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Rep. Tom Emmer, chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee, has a front-row seat to the Minneapolis debate from his district northwest of the city. He said the initiative is something his committee is likely to highlight in next year’s elections in

its support of House GOP candidates.

“This is not a mainstream view that we should be defunding our police,” he said.

“Democrats are going to pay for it at the ballot box in 2022.”

Mr. Emmer said he expects crime and opposition to policing will be a top issue for many voters, especially in areas with debates about “defund the police.” Besides Minnesota, he pointed to two competitive districts south of Portland, Ore., where violence has risen amid city budget cuts to policing.

‘House Democrats do not support defunding the police.’

— Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney, chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee

Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney of New York, chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, responded with a statement that pointed to House Democratic support earlier this year for \$350 billion in state and local aid that some governments used to pay police. The funding was included in a broader \$1.9 trillion Covid-19 aid bill that was approved

along party lines.

“House Democrats do not support defunding the police,” Mr. Maloney said. “Republicans have taken to distorting Democrats’ records to score political points, while ignoring their responsibility to address the serious need for critical reforms in policing and racial justice.”

Ms. Craig is trying to make sure her constituents know she is supportive of police.

“My friend and colleague Tom Emmer knows that it’s complete bullshit that I’ve ever supported the defund the police movement,” she said. “And yet he leads the National Republican Campaign Committee, and not only will they try to stick that to me, but they will try to stick that with every other swing district Democrat across this country.”

Mr. Kistner, a Marine veteran who came within 2.26 percentage points of beating Ms. Craig in 2020, said she should have been vocal sooner about a Minneapolis proposal that has been discussed for months.

The proposed change in Minneapolis, a city dominated by Democrats, would shift direct supervision of public safety from the mayor to the city council. If approved, there would no longer be a requirement to fund a minimum number of officers linked to the city’s population, which grew to 429,954 in the 2020 census.

The ballot question, in the first municipal election since Mr. Floyd’s death, is backed by a city council majority but opposed by Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, a Democrat. Early voting for the Nov. 2 election starts Sept. 17.

Yes 4 Minneapolis, a coalition of groups pushing for the change, secured more than 20,000 signatures to get the proposal on this year’s ballot.

JaNaé Bates, communications director for the coalition, said Democrats shouldn’t run from the effort because of what she called GOP fear tactics. “No matter what, there will be police officers that are part of the department,” she said.

Nationally, a USA TODAY/Ipsos Poll released in July showed less than a quarter of American adults support the movement known as “defund the police” and about 4 in 10 said just talking about the idea had hurt Democratic candidates in last year’s elections.



A backer of November's ballot initiative discussed the issue with a Minneapolis resident in July.

PHOTO: JIM MONE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

"It's crazy," Savage resident Barb Sackett said of the Minneapolis proposal. "It would be complete and total lawlessness, as if it isn't already." Ms. Sackett, a retired airline worker, says she considers herself an independent voter.

Violent crime in Minneapolis has been on the rise. There were 82 criminal homicide victims in the city in 2020, twice as many as in 2019, [state data shows](#). This year through August, there were already 61 and robberies were up 7.7% from a year earlier, according to Minneapolis data.

Kelly Cichosz, a 53-year-old forensic nurse who lives in another suburb just southwest of Savage, said she never expected to be a gun owner. That changed in April 2020 when she said she obtained a permit to carry a handgun in public.

Ms. Cichosz, who opposes the Minneapolis proposal, said concerns about increasing violence and unrest that could be triggered by Covid-19 prompted her to take the action.

"The police are in a really tough spot because there are too many calls for them to respond to," she said. "It's a topic of concern for everyone."

Mr. Frey, who is seeking reelection as Minneapolis mayor in November, acknowledged concern that the ballot effort could hurt some in his party. "I'm not for defunding the police, and especially when we have one of the lowest number of officers per capita of any major city in the entire country," he said.

In a [budget address last month](#), Mr. Frey said his city's police department now has about 600 officers, down from roughly 870 before Mr. Floyd's death. The drop is the result of a large number of retirements and disability claims.

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