

Sheriff, district leaders take Lyons' pulse on storing AR-15 rifles in schools

District considering proposal to put biometric gun safes in Lyons, Niwot schools

By Sam Lounsberry

Staff Writer

Longmont Times-Call

Posted: Tue Jun 05 21:29:37 MDT 2018

If you go

What: Meeting on rifle storage at Niwot High School

When: 6 p.m. Thursday

Where: Sunset Middle School, 1300 S. Sunset St., Longmont.

Questions ranging from whether a suicidal student would be drawn to shoot up a school where police have stored an AR-15 rifle to why the St. Vrain Valley School District won't install metal detectors were posed to law enforcement and district officials Tuesday night. About 50 parents and students gathered at Lyons Middle/Senior High School to discuss a Boulder County Sheriff's Office request to store a police-issued AR-15 rifle in a safe inside the school.

The sheriff's office also has proposed to store a rifle at Niwot High School, citing increased response times for additional deputies to arrive in Niwot and Lyons as compared to

campuses within city limits.

The firearms in both schools would be locked in safes able to be opened only by a deputy's fingerprint, if the proposal is approved. Among the audience were Lyons Mayor Connie Sullivan, St. Vrain Valley Board of Education President Bob Smith, recently retired sheriff's deputy Brit Fell, who served as the Lyons Middle/Senior school resource officer for 19 years, and Deputy Mitch Rosebrough, who will take over for Fell as the school's on-campus officer in the fall.

While the number of public speakers who explicitly supported storing a rifle inside the school was about equal to those opposed, the conversation was led mostly by questions from parents who wanted to know what else besides adding rifles inside schools could be done to prevent a campus shooting.

"To work on a culture of safety and well-being is a foundational piece to all of this. If you don't do those things, putting a rifle in place isn't going to be the answer," Smith said. "From our discussions already, no one wants to put another gun in the school. But the question is, 'Is it the best thing for our kids?'"

Sullivan noted the small number of police officers working in Lyons that would be available to respond to a school threat, while sheriff's Division Chief Robert Sullenberger said staffing constraints complicate requests to add a second school resource officer onto campuses.

"This is not how we're going to stop the next shooting from happening," Sullivan said of the rifle storage. "That will be a totally different effort. I don't think law enforcement would propose this lightly."

St. Vrain Superintendent Don Haddad mentioned the additions of counseling staff over the last several years at schools across the district as a positive step, while stating the district is against installing metal detectors at schools or [arming teachers](#).

Haddad reassured those in attendance at several points that a decision regarding the sheriff's proposal is far from made by the school board. He explained the installation of gun safes to store the rifles is more acceptable for the board to consider than metal detectors because the firearms would be out of sight to students.

"A welcoming school environment (is most important)," Haddad said. "The gun locked away in a safe no one would ever see."

The board several years ago rejected a similar proposal from the sheriff's office, he said, but the proliferation of school shootings across the country since has propelled the idea back into consideration.

In response to a question from Joe Soma, father of a seventh-grader at Lyons, about which data-driven literature or studies the sheriff's office is basing its support for the in-school rifle storage, Sullenberger cited traditional "police training" as the driving recommendation.

"I think the relationship Brit Fell established with (my daughter) was the difference and not his armaments," Soma said, with Sullenberger agreeing.

Sullenberger at multiple points acknowledged the accessibility of the rifle for a school resource officer depends on where the officer is on campus at the initiation of a school shooting.

Nathan Pierce, a father of two children who attend Lyons Middle/Senior, said he supports having safes holding AR-15s at several spots inside a school to increase an officer's chances of obtaining such a weapon fast enough to use in trying to neutralize a shooter.

"I'm hearing some people asking, 'How far will we go (with security measures in schools)?' We're talking about the safety of my children. You go as far as you need to go," Pierce said.

Sullenberger in an interview said additional safes potentially could be installed if the sheriff's proposal is approved and deemed to have gone well with one safe at either school.

He said officials will monitor student bodies and school staffs for signs of anxiety related to the storage of a rifle in school buildings if the pilot is approved.

He also said that in addition to the rifle that would be stored inside a locked safe within the school resource officer's office, the deputy would still have an AR-15 inside his or her police vehicle. The weapons always have been stored inside the deputies' vehicles on campus.

Fell, the retired longtime Lyons school resource officer, explained in an interview that he spent the majority of his time in the school in meetings within mere feet of his office, where the safe would be stored.

He said he wished he would have been able to store a rifle for him to use, if necessary, while he was on the job.

"There is an AR-15 on campus every day now in our car. The biometric safe is actually a more secure place for the rifle than the car," he said. "This is not a political stance or anything along those lines."

While several elementary school-aged children spoke in opposition of the rifle storage proposal, Lyons freshman Quin Gregg asked Haddad what more would be done to gain an accurate sample of the entire school body's thoughts on the idea.

So far, an advisory group of students from both the Niwot and Lyons schools have been consulted about the sheriff's proposal, and Haddad said their responses have been "a mixed bag."

In response to being asked to describe the job and daily schedule of a school resource officer, Rosebrough thanked the sheriff's office for allowing him to train with Fell for a month before the school year ended.

"What I've learned over the last month is a partnership, not only with the staff, but with the kids. My job is to make sure this school is safe, to make sure these guys get an education. I take it very personal because every kid should walk away with a high school diploma," Rosebrough said to applause from throughout the room.

A similar meeting to which members of the Niwot High School feeder community are invited is scheduled for 6 p.m. Thursday at Sunset Middle School in Longmont.

Sam Lounsberry: 303-473-1322, slounsberry@prairiemountainmedia.com and twitter.com/samlounz.