

Editorial

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Important resource

It took more than a decade, but Ulster County legislators have finally bought into the progressive idea of establishing a criminal justice council to offer advice and direction on law enforcement issues.

Fourteen years ago, a similar proposal by the state Division of Probation was ignored by the Legislature, and again in 1998, when recommended by the National Institute of Justice Jails Division.

But last week, in response to a five-year analysis by the League of Women Voters, lawmakers unanimously agreed to form the panel.

We commend the League for its work and diligence.

The council won't be a civilian review board as such; it will have no enforcement powers. But it could encompass some of the elements. Its members will include representatives from law enforcement agencies, the courts and the Mental Health Department, in addition to seven residents not employed in the criminal justice system or its agencies.

Dutchess County has had a similar program for years.

For Ulster County, the timing would seem fortuitous. The new Law Enforcement Center, finally expected to open in September, will house a number of the offices that will come under the scope of this council. That will make it an important resource in helping to coordinate programs.

In addition to acting as a sounding board, the council also is expected to advocate for, greater efficiencies and resources for law enforcement agencies. In that sense, the citizens input component - "folding their ideas into the criminal justice system," as Sheriff Richard Bockelmann put it - is particularly noteworthy.

Unfortunately, this council wasn't in place when formal planning for the Law Enforcement Center began. We can only speculate about how much, if at all, the long-delayed facility might have been expedited were it in existence.

Now that it's here, we trust the Legislature will make good use of the council.