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U.S.

After Synagogue Attack, Pittsburgh's Push for Stricter Gun Laws Sparks Backlash

Opponents say introduced legislation would impinge on rights of law-abiding citizens and wouldn't make city safer



The massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh on Oct. 27, 2018, is considered the deadliest attack on Jewish people in U.S. history. PHOTO: MATT ROURKE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Kris Maher

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PITTSBURGH—A little more than three months after 11 people were shot to death while worshipping at a synagogue here, city leaders and residents are battling over proposed gun restrictions.

The legislation put forward by the city's mayor and city council members would ban within city limits semiautomatic rifles, bump stocks and certain types of ammunition, as well as expand the ability of courts to seize guns from people determined to be a threat to family members or law enforcement.

The measures have drawn a swift backlash in a liberal-leaning city ringed by more conservative suburbs where there is a long tradition of gun ownership. Opponents have called for the mayor's impeachment or arrest, and the local district attorney has said that instituting the gun restrictions would violate state law.

"Arrest me. Sue me. Impeach me," Mayor Bill Peduto, a Democrat, wrote on Twitter on Jan. 28. "I was elected to protect my constituents and that is exactly what I will do."

The massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in the city's Squirrel Hill neighborhood on the morning of Oct. 27 is considered the deadliest attack on Jewish people in U.S. history. Last month, federal prosecutors charged suspected gunman Robert Bowers with 63 counts in a superseding indictment, including federal hate crimes.

Prosecutors said that Mr. Bowers was motivated by his hatred of Jews and that he had posted critical statements about the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and affiliated congregations, which included Dor Hadash, one of three congregations sharing space at the Tree of Life synagogue.

Some members of Dor Hadash have formed an independent organization called Squirrel Hill Stands Against Gun Violence, which supports the mayor's proposals.

"I recognize we're in this for the long haul," said Carolyn Ban, 76, a co-founder and a former dean at the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs. "But at least it gives us a feeling that we can do something."

Eve Wider, 47, another member of Dor Hadash and a co-founder of the antigun violence group, said she has trouble sleeping. "I think a lot about what happened, and every shooting that has happened in Pittsburgh since then," she said. "I feel more of a responsibility to speak up."

Opponents say the changes would impinge on the rights of law-abiding citizens and wouldn't make the city safer. They also say they worry the push is part of a larger movement to persuade state lawmakers to tighten gun laws.

"It's going to be a platform for them to try to push gun control at the state level," said Val Finnell, a 50-year-old retired Air Force colonel who lives just outside of Pittsburgh.



Pittsburgh officials are proposing to ban within city limits semiautomatic rifles, bump stocks and certain types of ammunition.
PHOTO: STEVE MELLON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mr. Finnell said he opposes the Pittsburgh bills because they would restrict the rights of gun owners and could lead other municipalities to follow suit. “We don’t want the state to turn into a patchwork quilt of gun laws,” he said.

Last year, the Republican-led state legislature passed a measure requiring people convicted of domestic abuse to more quickly surrender guns. Gov. Tom Wolf, a Democrat, has cited the Tree of Life shooting in calling for additional gun-control measures.

Meanwhile, national groups such as Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership and Gun Owners of America said they oppose the Pittsburgh bills.

Last month, gun-rights supporters held a rally downtown, many carrying rifles and other guns, to oppose the measures. Allegheny County District Attorney Stephen A. Zappala, a Democrat, said the city council doesn’t have the authority to pass such legislation.

Mr. Peduto said the city council could take action on the bills as early as this week. In an interview, the mayor said that he wants to challenge state law and that he believes the bills will make residents safer.

As a supporter of the Second Amendment, he also said he understands the vehement opposition. He described growing up in a home with a .22 caliber rifle and a shotgun and said he was “a pretty good shot” as a member of the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps in college.

“Western Pennsylvania is proud of its gun tradition, and it is a part of what many people see as a family tradition,” Mr. Peduto said. “But having somebody walking down a major street with

an AR-15 strapped to their shoulder does not provide anyone in Pittsburgh with a feeling of domestic tranquility.”

The Tree of Life shooting pushed him to take action on measures he had been considering following other cases of gun violence in the city, he said.

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