In the two years since George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer, Albany has made some headway toward reducing police misconduct in our own city. For example, we have strengthened the investigative and enforcement powers of the Albany Community Police Review Board. But much more remains to be done. By enacting Local Law C creating a Public Safety Commission, the Common Council heeds three key demands made by Albany’s citizens: to de-couple public safety from policing, center community voices, and end systemic racism.

The need for the first of these three demands, to de-couple public safety from policing, is tragically evident in police encounters that result in injury or death to community members. The APD is often called to respond to matters that are less related to criminality than to issues of homelessness, mental health, or substance abuse. Under the Public Safety Commission created by Local Law C, trained health professionals and social workers will respond to such situations, instead of armed police officers. Enacting Local Law C will protect the safety of police officers, the citizens they encounter, and the community as a whole.

The second of the three demands by Albany’s residents, to center community voices, was issued loudly and clearly by citizen members of the Albany Policing Reform and Reinvention Collaborative. Two Collaborative working groups --- “Civilian Oversight” and “Police Department Functions” --- recommended that a community-centered commission be established to oversee public safety decision-making and operations. Local Law C will replace the non-elected police chief’s sole authority for public safety oversight with a Public Safety Commission, the majority of whose members will be appointed by elected Common Council members.

The third demand, to end systemic racism, is a very tall order, indeed. Ending systemic racism requires more than just legislative change, as racist practices are rooted in history and culture. Past history is impossible to change, and cultural change takes time and patience. But the process must begin with legislative changes such as Local Law C. By enacting this new law, the Common Council will require that the principles of procedural justice be respected in every interaction between Albany public safety officials and community members.

The Center for Law and Justice strongly recommends that the Common Council seize this opportunity to de-couple public safety from policing, center community voices, and end systemic racism. Please pass Local Law C, and put Albany on the path toward equal justice for all.