

New Bedford legislator Tony Cabral files bill to ban sheriffs, deputies from polling places

Colin A. Young

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A New Bedford lawmaker is proposing to amend the state law that deals with the preservation of order by police at polling locations by banning sheriffs and their deputies from showing up to maintain order among voters and sign-holders.

Under a bill (HD 5270) filed Friday by Rep. Antonio Cabral, no county or state law enforcement officer, sheriff, deputy sheriff or special sheriff would be “permitted on the premises of a polling place or within 300 feet of a polling place to preserve order or to protect the election officers and supervisors from any interference with their duties or to aid in enforcing the laws relating to elections without the express written approval of both the secretary of public safety and security and the board or officer in charge of the police force of the city or town.” People who work for a sheriff or on a sheriff’s behalf would similarly be banned. Among those who would be barred from polling places under Cabral’s bill would be Bristol County Sheriff Tom Hodgson, a Republican and staunch supporter of President Donald Trump with whom Cabral has previously feuded.

In 2017, the House passed a Cabral bill to ban inmate labor outside the borders of Massachusetts. The legislation was aimed at Hodgson, who had suggested he would offer up his prisoners as labor to build Trump’s border wall. Nine other representatives, including co-filer Rep. William Straus of

Mattapoisett, and Sen. Michael Brady have co-sponsored Cabral's bill, which is on the docket in the House clerk's office but has not yet been assigned to a committee. Though Cabral's bill does not appear to address this type of situation, a 2016 visit to a New Bedford polling place sparked outrage and concern.

In 2016, former President Bill Clinton met Hillary Clinton supporters and voters outside a polling location in the city, which led to complaints that access to the voting booth was infringed upon by the large crowd gathered near the entrance and a shortage of parking.

Citing statements by President Trump, Attorney General Maura Healey last Thursday issued a formal advisory to local officials and community organizations to highlight laws stating that intimidating or interfering with voters is illegal. The advisory referenced an Aug. 20 TV interview in which the president was asked if he would send poll watchers to monitor elections for possible voters fraud.

"We're going to have everything. We're going to have sheriffs and law enforcement and we're going to have, hopefully, U.S. attorneys, and we're going to have everybody, and attorney generals, but it's very hard," Trump said, according to Healey's advisory, which was issued in English and Spanish.