

Article 1: Council scrutinizes proposed police officer increase

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City Council members spent over an hour Wednesday grilling Austin Police Department Chief Art Acevedo and other APD staff on the department's proposed Fiscal Year 2015-16 budget, zeroing in on a plan to add 82 sworn police officers to the force at a cost of \$6.6 million.

Several Council members appeared hesitant about the costs involved with the idea, citing affordability concerns and unmet needs in other areas of the proposed budget as a major constraint.

Acevedo explained that the request is part of a five-year plan the APD developed with the University of Texas to hire 410 sworn officers to increase average uncommitted time for patrol officers to 30 percent by Fiscal Year 2018-19 and maintain that figure in the following fiscal year. The current uncommitted time average, he said, fluctuates between 17 and 21 percent.

Uncommitted time, Acevedo said, is the time in which a patrol officer is not engaged in resolving a specific call. Increasing that time, he argued, would give officers more opportunities to take part in community engagement activities in order to prevent and reduce crime.

"What we want to achieve is, we want our police officer – the one that's going to come to your door, the one that's going to come to your home – we want to create space and time for them to be able to build relationships (with the public)," Acevedo said.

"I've worked in some very tough places, and I didn't care what the problem was, there was always a direct correlation between police visibility, police action, police everything," Acevedo added. "No matter what the bad thing is, when you saw more cops in the neighborhood, the bad outcomes went down."

The proposal, however, would come at a significant cost. The \$6.6 million in funding that the APD has requested in the budget would cover 24 full-time positions for a full year starting in October and 58 positions for a half-year starting in April. The remaining half-year of funding for those late-starting positions would presumably come out of the Fiscal Year 2016-17 budget.

The APD has also requested \$425,000 for nine months of funding for three new sworn positions that it has identified as unmet needs, bringing the total request to 85 sworn officers at a cost of approximately \$7 million.

Council Member Ann Kitchen, though she said she believes community engagement is "the right direction to be going in," asked Acevedo to compile a list of alternatives that the APD could pursue to increase uncommitted time for police officers without hiring more. "Eighty-two officers is a lot of officers, considering the budget that we're dealing with," she said.

Council Member Greg Casar sought assurance that the uncommitted time would actually go toward community engagement. "I think that some of the concerns on the dais that I'm hearing might be, how do we know that if we increase uncommitted time, that that time will be committed to that community policing work?" he asked.

Acevedo said the APD would track the amount of uncommitted time that officers spend engaging with the community or patrolling neighborhoods.

Council Member Don Zimmerman harshly criticized the idea, arguing that the APD should instead invest resources into solving crimes. “The whole subject to me of uncommitted time – my opinion, and I think my district would agree with (me) – it’s just the wrong metric to focus on,” he said.

Zimmerman pointed to a line in the budget stating that, in Fiscal Year 2014-15, 14.3 percent of “Part 1” crimes have been cleared. This metric includes both property crimes and violent crimes.

APD Assistant Chief Brian Manley put some of Austin’s recent clearance rates into a national context.

“We cleared, in 2013, 57 percent of our violent crimes — the U.S. average is 39 percent — and in property crimes, we cleared 13 percent and the U.S. average is 14 percent. So, we’re right on average in property crimes and we far exceed in violent crimes,” Manley said. “Our homicide rate was 100 percent compared to a national 57 percent.”

When asked if he would commit all new police officers to solving unsolved crimes, Acevedo responded in the negative. “In violent crime, we exceed the national average nationwide. Let me tell you why that proactive policing, community engagement piece is huge. Because if a crime already occurred, it doesn’t matter if we solve it or not, we’ve already failed as a community,” he said.

“I would rather invest in providing our residents additional time for the officers to be proactive instead of reactive,” Acevedo later added.

Zimmerman pressed on. “Imagine the frustration that our taxpayers would feel if they see more and more police in the community, driving around looking to throw a football with a kid – whatever you do to kind of build the image of the Police Department – while the unsolved crimes remain at this, to me, this is a crazy low number of crimes that we’re solving,” he said.

Mayor Steve Adler appeared more sympathetic to Acevedo’s request, but noted that the proposed APD budget, at \$394 million, is a significant chunk of the \$3.5 billion proposed Fiscal Year 2015-16 city budget.

“I know that the Council is going to be looking at ways throughout the budget (process) to address the affordability issue,” Adler said. “I wish you had come up with a better word than ‘uncommitted time.’ It’s discretionary time, and I think that there is a benefit that comes from having officers with that discretion.”

The APD currently has 1,846 sworn officers and 683 full-time civilian employees.

Photo courtesy of Edward Kimmel [CC BY 2.0], via Flickr.

Article 2: Spelman skeptical of request for more officers in APD budget

As the city inches closer toward adopting its FY2012 budget, City Council Member Bill Spelman and Austin Police Chief Art Acevedo remain at odds over how best to fund the Austin Police Department. The two men continued their debate on the subject yesterday, when Acevedo went before Council to present his department's proposed \$282.9 million budget, a number that includes funds for 49 new sworn officers.

Those 49 officers are necessary, said Acevedo, if the city wants to maintain its ratio of 2 officers per 1,000 citizens.

Spelman, who has written several books and articles about police work and spent seven years with the Police Executive Research Forum, expressed his skepticism again Wednesday that the 2-per-1,000 ratio is necessary to maintain the city's low crime rate.

Commenting on a chart Acevedo presented comparing the staffing ratios and violent crime rates of several major American cities, Spelman noted that there seemed to be an inverse relationship between the two, that the most violent cities – such as Washington, D.C., and Atlanta — also tend to be the most heavily policed. Meanwhile, San Jose, Calif., has a lower violent crime rate than Austin but with a ratio of only 1.44 officers per 1,000.

"It looks backwards," Spelman told Acevedo. "Why does it do that?"

Acevedo responded that when it comes to appropriate levels of police staffing, "there is really no national standard, no magical number that exists." He said that many considerations – such as population density, community demographics, location and size of an area, community engagement, and police deployment strategies – all play a role in determining the proper ratio for a particular city.

The difference with a city like San Jose, for example, is that they have the California Highway Patrol doing a lot of their work, a luxury Austin doesn't have, said Acevedo.

"There is a direct correlation between police visibility and bad outcomes, and they have a pretty large footprint of the state police that we don't have," Acevedo said.

Spelman pointed out that Acevedo and the department are looking to promote 14 officers to the rank of detective in the coming budget year in the belief that more detectives mean more precise and better police work. He said that holding on stubbornly to the 2-per-1,000 ratio could actually be hurting the department's ability to investigate and prevent crimes.

"If we hold ourselves to a hard, fast ratio ... we are draining resources that could be used for more detectives or more evidence technicians (or) 911 operators," Spelman said. "(It) reduces your flexibility to be able to move your resources around to the places where they can do the most good."

Police Department Chief Of Staff David Carter responded that those 49 additional officers are needed to address and head off "threats we see on the horizon," such as an increase in crime, a reduction in police clearance rates, and a reduction in officers' "uncommitted time" – time they are simply out on the street not responding to calls.

An officer on uncommitted time, said Carter, "is going to prevent crime by establishing relationships (with citizens), and they're also actually going to solve crime by establishing those relationships."

In 2010, the department's average uncommitted time was about 27 percent, down from 31 percent the year before. "That's a red flag for us, because it means we're becoming more reactive and less proactive, less preventative to address some of those issues," said Carter.

Acevedo agreed. "The number one priority of the department is to prevent crime, not to respond to crime and not to solve crime," he said. "And the way that you prevent crime is by a highly visible police department that has the ability to build relationships. That's where our greatest challenge is now, with our uncommitted time, and our visibility is what we want to impact, and the way we're going to do that is by having those sworn bodies."

Spelman said that while an increase in uncommitted time is a good thing, he remains unconvinced that an increase in the number of cops on the street will have the same positive effect.

"I am less sanguine than you are that if we were able to increase that uncommitted time to a higher number, the increase in police visibility all by itself would have a measurable effect on the crime rate," Spelman said. "I'm not sure the record is that clear. What studies I've seen over the last 30 years suggest that just more patrol by itself won't do a lot of good."