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Jim Billings asks Pueblo City Council to increase sales tax by .25 percent to bolster the police force.



Jim Billings

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THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN**

Pueblo Police Chief Jim Billings asked the City Council Monday to consider increasing the sales tax by 0.25 percent to pay for 17 more police officers.

Most of the council members agreed that the city needs more police officers, but there was less agreement on how to pay for it.

Billings said the department employs 195 officers right now.

He said that when he started with the department in 1975, there were 197 officers.

While the staffing levels and city population haven't changed significantly in 30 years, Billings said the county population, which often comes to Pueblo to shop and recreate, has jumped, as has the demand for police services.

In the three decades since he joined the force, Pueblo has added several significant events including the Chile and Frijole Festival, Rocky Mountain National Street Rods and Little Britches Rodeo that bring a number of visitors to the community.

Billings said changes in the way officers are required to write reports and how they handle calls such

as domestic violence cases have also created additional burdens.

"When I first started (domestic violence) was a 10- to 15-minute call and we would usually send the husband away somewhere to cool off for the night," Billings said. "Now if we have grounds to make an arrest we make it and that (paperwork) can take two to four hours."

In 1975, there were 76,000 calls for service. In 2007, that number jumped to 114,000.

Billings said the department is frequently at a saturation point, where there is a list of calls and no officer available to respond.

He shared stories of frustrated citizens who called to report crimes in progress and no officer came in time to stop it.

He said in one incident, a staff member at an assisted living facility called the police to report that someone had threatened to come to the facility to assault one of the workers there.

Since the suspect was not on scene at the time of the call, the call got a lower priority.

By the time police got to the call the suspect had come to the center and assaulted one of the caregivers, Billings said.

Billings said the department follows a priority list for calls.

Calls that represent an immediate threat to life take highest priority, followed by threats to property, report calls and provisions of services in that order. The average response time to the highest priority calls is 10 minutes and 44 seconds, Billings said.

The lowest priority calls, on average, take more than 45 minutes to get a response.

The overall average response time is 22 minutes and 27 seconds.

Billings suggested one way to beef up the staff is to follow the model set by the city of Aurora.

Billings proposed a .25-cent increase to the sales tax that eventually would pay to add 17 more officers to the force.

Entry-level officers earn salary and benefits worth about \$57,000 a year. By their third year, that jumps to \$71,500 and by their seventh year it jumps to \$81,000.

Billings estimates the city would need up to \$1.5 million to add the officers.

Based on average revenues of \$6.8 million generated by the city's half-cent sales tax for economic development, the .25 percent tax would generate about \$3.4 million.

With the money, Billings said he would add nine officers - three per shift - to the patrol division. He would also add three officers to the support shift that covers the peak hours from 8 p.m. to 4 a.m. and would add one more detective to each of the five detective units.

The council took no action on the proposal Monday and it is unclear whether council would support asking voters to increase the sales tax by another fraction of a cent to pay for the officers.

"Is there any research out there that suggests when you hire more police officers, it actually reduces crime? It's easy to say hire more police officers but what we really want to get at is effectively reducing the level of crime in this community," said Councilwoman Judy Weaver. "I'm not convinced the numbers you have in 1975 are the numbers you need today. I don't want to act so naively that hiring 17 officers is going to create a reduction in crime. It may, but I'd like to hear about other strategies you're using to help reduce crime."

Councilman Mike Occhiato said he would like to see more police officers, but didn't want to increase taxes to do it.

Instead, Occhiato pushed for the city budget to focus solely on city services, making public safety the top priority, followed by parks and public works.

"We keep listening to everybody who comes in and cries about how they don't have enough money to run their program," Occhiato said. "Since (Sept. 11, 2001) every department in the city has been cut."

Councilman Ray Aguilera said he would support adding more officers and said he would be willing to see eight to 10 new officers first instead of hiring 17 at once.