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Millbrae considers options for stretched police force

By Niko Kyriakou on September 15, 2011 ' SF Examiner

'After a decade of cutting back its police force, the Millbrae Police Department can no longer do its job properly.

City officials say the 29-member department — down from 38 members 10 years ago — lacks the staff to provide timely services, thoroughly follow up on unsolved cases and properly oversee officers. And since officers sometimes work 16-hour shifts, they are more prone to mistakes and injury, and expose the department to liability.

The cash-strapped city is looking at two solutions to the problem.

One would be hiring enough people to do the job right, something city officials estimate would cost an additional \$410,000 a year. The other would be contracting with the sheriff for police work, the cost of which has yet to be determined.

Councilwoman Gina Papan said that after years of relying on temporary, part-time or retired police chiefs, the most essential part of the rehiring solution would be to hire a chief who would provide long-term vision and leadership.

“We’ve been using Band-Aids for a long time,” Papan said.

The city would need to bring on a new police commander and increase four half-time positions to full-time positions — including that of current interim Chief Neil Telford, who works half-time as San Bruno’s police chief.

Next week, officials will meet with the Sheriff’s Office to discuss outsourcing police services, spokesman Ray Lunny said.

But consolidation would be a bitter pill for Millbrae, which recently agreed to merge its Fire Department with those of Hillsborough, Burlingame and San Bruno. Officials also invested two years into planning a merger with San Bruno’s police until a report commissioned by the city deemed that option financially untenable, Papan said.

Even as the size of Millbrae’s force has remained flat, the costs associated with fielding it have grown. Total personnel costs were \$4 million in the 2008-09 fiscal year and \$4.1 million in 2009-10, but surged to \$4.8 million last year. Throughout this period, the total

number of employees only varied by one half-timer.

President Robert Raw of the Millbrae Police Officers Association said his union has “no opinion” on which solution the council chooses, so long as they hire a full-time chief.

“We’re like a ship without a rudder,” Raw said. In the case of a county contract, Raw said full-time officers would retain their jobs. The fate of part-time and civilian employees is unknown, he added, noting that most civilians were retained when the sheriff took over policing for San Carlos and Half Moon Bay.

Raw said the department has been an “experiment” in cost savings for the City Council. While staff cuts seemed to work for a while, he said council members became “comfortable” with a downsized or half-time staff until Telford recently began demanding change. He said the council’s main focus now is on avoiding layoffs.

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Millbrae Will Lose Police Dept.

By [David Carini \(Patch Staff\)](#) - November 17, 2011 4:59 pm ET

In split vote, City Council decides to disband its police force.

“Our priority is to ensure public safety, and regrettably, this has to be done now,” said Councilwoman Gina Papan.

Rather than securing public safety for the city, some residents worried outsourcing would jeopardize it.

“Contracting out the Police Department will create a negative impact on our businesses, schools and property values,” said Joe Chen on behalf of the Peninsula Chinese Business Association.

That perception however may be unfounded. San Carlos City Manager Jeff Maltbie said that he was very pleased with the Sheriff’s Office.

San Carlos outsourced its 85-year-old police department to the Sheriff’s Office on Oct. 31, 2010.

In a year, it conducted two studies on the sheriff’s level of service. The average emergency response time had not changed, and Part 1 crimes, such as rapes, murders, aggravated assault and robbery, decreased slightly.

San Carlos also conducted two surveys measuring residents' satisfaction with the Sheriff's Office. Out of the 102 surveys completed, citizens were 98 percent satisfied with services.

"[The Sheriff's Office] has come through on all its promises and it has made an effort to really integrate into our community," Maltbie said.

But Millbrae is not like San Carlos, which neighbors Redwood City, said Wayne Lee, who will soon become a councilman.

Lee helped collect about 480 signatures of residents who wanted to save the Millbrae Police Department, even by imposing a tax.

Millbrae would need to wait until June 2012 to place a measure on the ballot, which during a special election requires two-thirds approval.

City Council members could have opted to spend an additional \$410,000 a year to fund the Police Department and begin searching for a police chief, since Chief Neil Telford will return to San Bruno on Friday.

"We don't have that money," Quigg said. "We have a dysfunctional department right now. We have worked on this for months. We had two town-hall meetings and listened to the public."

Millbrae will now negotiate with the Sheriff's Office to determine the exact scope of services and plan the transition. The Millbrae City Council approved contracting out police services to the San Mateo County Sheriff's Office in a 3-2 vote late Tuesday with council members Paul Seto and Nadia Holober dissenting.

Last week, the sheriff resubmitted an offer after residents overwhelmingly opposed disbanding the Millbrae Police Department, claiming that the original outsourcing offer was inadequate. **The city expects to save about \$1.1 million a year with the sheriff's deal, but will staff four fewer police employees.**

"We had two town-hall meetings and we listened to the public," said Mayor Dan Quigg, referring to the Nov. 1 and Nov. 5 sessions on police services held in the Chetcuti Room.

However, the majority of people that spoke at the council meeting were still unsatisfied with the revised proposal.

"It is still just a baseline proposal," said Millbrae Traffic Sgt. Ron Gleeson. "Dave Chetcuti Jr., [a crime analyst with the MPD] whose father gave his life to this city, is not included." Some employees' positions, including Chetcuti's and the Millbrae Police Volunteers, have yet to be addressed.

As a result, the public and two council members proposed the city delay its decision until it receives more detailed information and perhaps wait for the new council members to govern.

"We've waited seven years to get to this point, I don't see why we can't wait for the next council to make a decision," said Paul Seto, who will be relinquishing his council seat.

And Holober, who on the other hand will remain on the council, also agreed.

However, some police officers urged the council to act swiftly and favored the sheriff's proposal.

"Millbrae cannot wait for another study, and neither can we," said Traffic Officer Gaby Chaghouri, who stood in front of the council with seven other officers who were all eager to work at the Sheriff's Office.

"[The sheriff] offers us leadership and opportunity in career training," he said.

The Sheriff's Office will hire every sworn and non-sworn full-time Millbrae police employee, according to San Mateo County Undersheriff Carlos Bolanos.

But, the sheriff said he would hold the positions open until the end of December, compelling the council to act quickly.