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Cost of Lafayette Police Department scrutinized at council meeting

By Nick Marnell



Vice Mayor Susan Candell Courtesy city of Lafayette

With the city of Lafayette projecting a \$1.5 million operating loss in the next fiscal year, an 11% increase in year-over-year spending for the city police department came under fire at the June 22 City Council meeting. Questions on the rise in police expenditures came not only from the public but also from Vice Mayor Susan Candell.

"The optics on this are terrible," said Candell, who refused to approve the city's 2020-21 budget because of rising police department costs.

Law enforcement expenses will jump from \$6.1 million to \$6.8 million in 2021, largely due to the increase in the cost of sworn officers. The city contracts its police services on a year-to-year basis with the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office, which in 2019 agreed to a four-year, 5% annual wage increase with the county for rank and file members.

"I realize we're not cheap. I know that," Lafayette Police Chief Ben Aldritt said. "My job is to manage the city's money responsibly, and I take that very seriously."

Lafayette's budget for law enforcement includes salaries for the chief, eight patrol officers, two parking control officers, two sergeants, two detectives and one floater, whose hours are filled mainly through overtime. The city discontinued its community services officer position and those duties have been absorbed by the chief and the two sergeants.

Council Member Cam Burks, head of global security for Adobe, does not want to see cutbacks in the police department. "We had two home invasions this year," Burks said. "I would not waver on the costs we're paying for public safety."

Using conservative estimates for revenue recovery, city officials presented a grim 5-year forecast with the general fund reserve balance shrinking from 79% of expenditures to 28% in 2025, while costs for police services were projected to rise from \$6.1 million to nearly \$8 million over the same period.

"We owe it to our residents to reallocate these funds to support our community better," said public speaker Tess Olsen.

The vice mayor agreed, insisting that changes in policing cannot occur quickly enough. "The reasons we've been given tonight that we can't change it, or we can't do it, are frustrating to me, because other cities are doing it," Candell said. The city of Berkeley July 1 cut \$9.2 million from its police department budget for 2021, and council members hinted at even more cuts to come. In June, Oakland cut law enforcement funding by \$14.6 million for next fiscal year.

With a national outcry for speedy, thorough investigations into police brutality and excessive use of force, and for holding officers accountable for their actions, Mayor Mike Anderson noted that an upcoming Lafayette public safety town hall should produce ideas on how to improve policing, and that the city public safety subcommittee will provide direction to officers.

"We haven't even scratched the surface on this," said Candell, who cast the only no vote on the city's 2020-21 fiscal year budget.

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