

Council explores way to hire 92 police - Fresno leaders ready to tap grant for 30 positions.

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A survey of Fresno City Council reveals it has enough votes today to approve the hiring of 30 police officers with the help of a federal **grant**.

The council, however, will debate whether the city has the money to take full advantage of the \$6.9 million **grant** that would help pay for 92 officers. If the council decides to hire all 92 officers, it would cost the city more than \$15 million, a staff report said.

Council President Henry Perea and council members Brian Calhoun, Brad Castillo and Jerry Duncan said Monday they will vote for the **grant**, assuring a majority. Members Tom Boyajian and Sal Quintero could not be reached, and Dan Ronquillo is on vacation. Mayor Alan **Autry** supports accepting the **grant**.

"Public safety is the city's No. 1 job," Duncan said.

Perea agreed, but said, "It's a double-edged sword. Can the city afford to hire the officers? Can the city not afford to have them?"

The **grant** provides about \$25,000 each year for three years for a new officer, leaving it up to the city to pay for the rest of the \$100,000 or more it costs for an officer's salary, benefits, equipment, training and other essentials.

Because of the city's tight finances, Police Chief Jerry Dyer proposes hiring 30 officers this fiscal year ending in June, 30 officers next fiscal year, 15 officers the following fiscal year, and 17 officers the fourth fiscal year.

Dyer said his plan would cost the city about \$300,000 this fiscal year; the money would come from traffic tickets, he said.

If the council decides to hire 30 officers next fiscal year, it would cost \$1.2 million, which also could be paid from ticket revenue.

Financial problems could arise if the city decides to hire the last 32 officers, which would cost more than \$13 million.

To offset the cost, Dyer proposes assigning 25 new officers to traffic enforcement, which would create more ticket revenue and "reduce the number of traffic accidents and save lives," Dyer said.

The plan also would reduce crime, Dyer said, because officers will be looking for motorists carrying guns and drugs and catch more people who have outstanding warrants.

City Controller Ruth Quinto said the city can afford to hire the first 30 officers. She said the appeal of the **grant** is that the city can re-evaluate its finances each year and determine whether it wants to keep using the **grant** money to hire more officers. If it decides not to, then it loses the remainder of the **grant**.

The Fresno Police Department's

\$101 million budget is a big chunk of the city's \$176 million general fund, which also supports other departments, including Parks and Recreation and City Hall. The department has 702 officers, and it has money to hire 15 more.

Dyer said the city must hire more officers to ensure police response time is at a safe level. Currently, the city has 1.6 officers per 1,000 people; Dyer says the national average is 2 per 1,000.

If all 92 officers are hired during the proposed six-year **grant** period, the city would maintain 1.6 officers per 1,000 people, based on projected growth.

Alfonso Hernandez, executive director of the Chicano Youth Center in central Fresno, said hiring more police officers may be politically popular, but money also should be invested in recreational and after-school programs.

"If we don't, we might as well build more prisons, jails and boot camps," he said.

Before the city starts hiring more officers, Hernandez said, it should start tackling some of society's bigger problems.

"People need jobs so they can buy homes and feel a part of society," he said.

The Rev. G.L. Johnson, spiritual leader of Peoples Church in north Fresno, said the city must find a balance. "Police are important, but children are our most valuable asset," he said.

The **grant** comes from the U.S. Department of Justice's Community Oriented Policing Services, or **COPS**. The city has until Dec. 5 to accept.

Dyer said the city will continue to pursue a waiver of any city expense, a request that was denied when it originally lobbied **COPS** officials for the **grant**.

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