

Public Safety Requires a Holistic Approach

By Council President Nick Licata

My three years of experience serving as the Seattle City Council's public safety chair taught me long ago of the need to increase police staffing levels. This year we have a new opportunity to address this need, in part because of the work of people throughout the city to send a clear message to the Council that Seattle needs more resources devoted to our public safety needs.

Police Staffing Levels in Seattle

Some citizens have pointed out that Seattle, when compared to other cities, has a lower than average number of police per capita. We currently have 2.2 police officers per thousand residents; the national average is 2.4 officers. However, we must take a closer look at this statistic to draw the right conclusion and direct us toward the most effective ways of fighting crime.

For example, data reveals that police departments east of the Mississippi have a higher than average number of police officers per capita. This is related to a number of historical trends. One such trend is that many of these departments also have higher percentages of uniformed officers and lower percentages of non-uniformed personnel than found in Seattle. In other words, Seattle employs civilians for many administrative tasks performed by police officers elsewhere.

Another consideration is the rate of crime. Although there is a pattern of more officers per capita in the eastern cities, many also have more crime. One cannot assume a larger police force will result in less crime.

For a statistical comparison, it is better to use the seven West Coast cities similar in size to Seattle. These are the same cities used by the Seattle's police officers' union, when negotiating their City employment contract, to determine comparable benefits and working conditions. These comparable cities are Portland, San Francisco, Sacramento, San Jose, San Diego, Oakland, and Long Beach.

When comparing Seattle to these seven cities, one discovers that we have the second highest ratio of police officers to residents. Only San Francisco has more officers per resident, however, the violent crime offense rate is 9% higher. Ironically, San Jose has the lowest ratio of officers per resident yet they have the lowest violent crime rate.

Below is a table comparing staffing levels of police departments to the rates of violent crime in each these cities. There are public safety measures other than violent crime to compare to staffing levels. Yet, whether I look at rates of violent crime, property crime, or quality of life crime, my conclusion is that reliance upon statistics alone reveals little more than the complexity of the relationship between the number of officers and the population of a city.

Crime is not a statistic. The impact of crime can not be measured with statistics because crime is a personal violation in our lives. How it affects us depends upon our individual perceptions. It tears at us; it angers us; and it saddens us. It can lead to fear when living, working, and playing in our neighborhoods. That Seattle's crime rate is relatively low when compared to that of other cities is no answer for the Ballard woman who called my office crying me to tell me that it took two hours for 911 to send an officer to respond to a robbery call. It's no response for the West Seattle resident who told me that when their car was broken into that an officer would not come to the scene to take a report unless evidence had been left at the scene or there were witnesses to the crime. It's not a satisfactory answer for the Mt. Baker resident who wrote to tell me that when \$10,000 worth of tools were stolen from a secured location at the property where they were building their new home, they were told that the officers would take a report, but that it would not be actively investigated because it was a low priority crime. It's not an answer for the people in the Madison-Miller neighborhood who are tired of walking through doorways smelling of urine and littered with syringes.

Funding a Comprehensive Public Safety Budget

We do need more police visibility on the streets, in and around our schools, libraries, and other public places. Fighting crime is not as easy as this though. It is not only a matter of adding police officers. Each city is unique with different problems to overcome.

Councilmember Steinbrueck and I, working with the public and the rest of the City Council, will be taking a comprehensive approach towards addressing crime in reviewing the Mayor's proposed budget. We will be working to develop a package of changes to the budget that will address: the public's call for increased police staffing, youth intervention and crime prevention programs, pedestrian improvements, and programs that link human services and public safety.

Seattle and our police department long ago moved from the old ways of a solely reactive law enforcement approach. We know it is better to solve problems than react to them. When the City has made budget cuts in recent years, we had to focus on some core priorities. No cuts were made to police functions responding to crime. Rather, in these belt-tightening times, it was decided that cuts in funding for SPD's collaborative, community-based, and problem-solving programs would be best weathered by our police department and residents. I am thankful that during this time, the officers and civilians working in the Seattle Police Department saved Seattle's place among the nation's safest cities. Still, there is evidence in every corner of the city that recent years' cuts to programs involving citizens to proactively identify problems, solve them, and in doing so unravel some of their underlying causes, have left Seattle's quality of life suffering.

Seattle City Attorney Tom Carr is an adherent of incorporating solution-oriented approaches to law enforcement. His 2005 Annual Report states "some public

safety and neighborhood livability problems can be better addressed through community-oriented problem solving rather than by traditional 'case-by-case' prosecution." Similarly, the Neighborhood Corrections Initiative (NCI) is an existing, successful City-funded collaboration with the community to "put an end to the cycle of arrest, jail, and release by closely monitoring offenders" (2005 SPD Annual Report). Of equal importance to the programs to identify problem areas and problem people are those that identify *the problems that people have*. When left unchecked, some problems that people have can quickly become intractable public safety challenges affecting the entire community.

Long-term Planning

SPD has begun to discuss, in the Public Safety, Governmental Relations, and Arts Committee I chair, their efforts strengthening the connection in their biennial budget to community public safety priorities. Next, we must develop a 5-7 year Public Safety Investment Plan with estimates for: 1) optimum levels of police staffing and crime prevention strategies; 2) the resources needed to pay for them; and 3) measures to check our progress each year. In doing so, we commit to building upon the down payment towards our long term goals that I hope the Council will make for new public safety funding in the 2007-2008 budget. I am confident that Seattle can be a safer, more livable city if we begin to budget this year new public safety investments in staffing and programs, as well committing today to begin long-term planning for tomorrow.

With Resolution 30878, the Council identified, in June, its core budget goals as: maintenance and preservation of the City's existing transportation infrastructure; maintaining service levels in support of basic human needs; enhancing public safety; environmental stewardship; and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of local government. The Council will be holding its second public hearing for the 2007-2008 budget deliberations on Monday, October 30 at 5:30 at City Hall.