

Audit Suggests Police Efficiency Can Be Improved

By Harry Saltzgaver
Executive Editor

More civilians working could reduce the number of new police officers Long Beach needs, and tougher parking enforcement with a private firm writing the tickets could increase revenue by up to \$2.5 million in the first year.

Those are two of the 12 initiatives offered after a performance audit of the Long Beach Police Department by City Auditor Laura Doud's office and consultant Public Finance Management (PFM). Doud presented the audit Tuesday to the City Council, along with her recommendations for action.

While the report praises the department for changes made since the initial strategic plan was put in place in 1994 — and notes that homicides in particular are showing a marked decrease as a result — it says more can be done. And while cost savings and more efficiency will be the result in the long run, buying technology and conducting training may actually increase police spending short-term.

"Many of these initiatives require a financial commitment from the city and will result in increased costs compared to the Police Department's current state," the report's executive summary says. "This analysis follows the assumption that the city is working towards increasing the number of officers on patrol."

The audit points out that the police department spends more than 45% of the city's general fund budget — \$169.5 million out of \$374.1 million. Included is an average of \$12 million for overtime each year.

Further, the department is reported to almost \$7 million over budget in the

current year, largely due to overtime, although that was not part of the audit report.

The city issued 413,443 parking tickets in 2006. Only 82% of those tickets were paid, raising \$4.4 million — but losing \$1 million. There currently are an estimated 13,000 cars in Long Beach with seven or more parking tickets outstanding, translating to \$7.8 million in lost revenue.

Under Doud's recommendation, the city would equip cars with automatic recognition cameras and a list of scofflaw plate numbers. Cars with a certain number of tickets could be "booted" by the enforcement officer (who could be a civilian).

If a car remained booted for several days without the tickets being paid, it then could be towed.

The police department supported that recommendation, but were less charitable towards renewing study of privatizing the parking enforcement group: Doud and PMI said a private company could write more than 100,000 additional parking tickets in a year.

But the police department said that approach had been looked at as part of the budget-cutting process, and had been rejected. Issues ranged from incentives to a private firm to aggressively write tickets to concerns about training, supervision and quality control.

After the presentation, the council voted unanimously to receive and file the audit, with a report due in 90 days regarding possible implementation of some recommendations.

"There are some good suggestions here," Mayor Bob Foster said. "But we're in the middle of a tough budget right now, and we need to move carefully."

current year, largely due to overtime, although that was not part of the audit report.

Police Officers Association President Steve James said that more officers on the street actually translates to more overtime, because each officer spends overtime in court and dealing with arrest reports late in his or her shift.

Since 1994 the department has "civilianized" 70 positions since 1994, releasing sworn officers for patrol, investigations and other duties. But PFM has identified another 23 spots currently handled by officers that could be done by civilians. The police department agreed, and said those positions could be used to lower a target of 100 new officers on the force to 77.

In a more controversial recommendation, the report suggests having civilians respond to Priority 3 calls for service. Those are "report" calls regarding things like burglaries that had already occurred. If trained civilians were hired to take those reports, the equivalent of 21 sworn officers could be freed up.

"I'm concerned about the safety aspect," Fourth District Councilman Patrick O'Donnell said. "We all know that any 9-1-1 call can escalate."

Three recommendations were aimed at increasing revenue from police operations. Doud said the policy for responding to false alarms should be reviewed again, with higher fines for repeat offenders.

A second recommendation would have Long Beach join other cities that install immobilizing "boot" clamps on cars when owners have refused to pay multiple parking tickets. Currently, the police can have a car towed if there are five unpaid tickets, but because that exercise is both time-consuming and costly, it doesn't take place as often as possible.