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Focus on L.B. police

Audit points to \$3.7 million in potential savings.

Like a family living paycheck to paycheck, city officials are turning a sharp eye on next year's budget, and the biggest single item is the Police Department. But help is coming from two directions.

One is money from Proposition H, an oil production tax voters approved by a 70 percent margin which will add 29 officers to the force. The other is a recent police efficiency study overseen by City Auditor Laura Doud that identifies \$3.7 million a year or more in potential savings.

The help is welcome, because the department is winding up the current fiscal year \$11 million over budget. That has to change, beginning next month and the start of a new fiscal year.

The spending excess came mostly from filling all the department's open positions, which in the past provided a convenient way to handle budget excesses. Police overtime, for example, hasn't changed dramatically in recent years, but for the past decade it has been regularly underbudgeted. The difference got made up by savings from the unfilled positions.

But if the Police Department is fully staffed, which it should be, the budget must be balanced another way. Which is where the efficiency study comes in.

The study, conducted by Public Financial Management (PFM) of Los Angeles, identified 12 efficiency initiatives within four categories, some of which won't be popular

with everyone. For example, the city could pick up \$1.46 million with a tougher booting-and-towing program for parking violators contracted out to a private firm. (West Hollywood did this and improved quality of service at 27 percent lower cost.)

Those on the City Council who favor using more expensive city employees rather than outside contractors will like this about as much as parking violators like to find a boot (steel clamp) on a wheel.

The four categories of savings included more civilians in jobs now held by sworn officers; more flexibility in staffing; improved technology for records, field reports and information sharing; and increased enforcement of fines, including one for the second false burglar alarm within a year.

Police officials worked with the researchers for several months and provided responses for each proposal. The department will give a formal analysis to the City Council in about 40 days.

The researchers were generous in their praise of the department for professionalism, quality of management, and improvements already made in redeploying more officers to patrol and in new technology. Not to mention a 40 percent reduction in killings in the past four years and similar reductions in other violent crimes.

The study offers tested recommendations that could trim overtime and other costs to pay for more officers and greater productivity. That and Proposition H revenue, rather than new taxes, is the way to solve the budget problems.