

---

---

Posted on Thu, Sep. 14, 2006

## City Council OKs 9.9 percent tax hike for '07

After debate, 16 officers will be hired

BY JASON HOPPIN  
Pioneer Press

The St. Paul City Council, voting Wednesday to raise the city's property tax levy nearly 10 percent, said some of the money would go toward hiring 16 police officers to fight neighborhood crime.

The 4-3 vote punctuated a contentious day at City Hall, where the city's police union held an afternoon news conference to push for more officers, sign-toting activists descended on council chambers and Mayor Chris Coleman had harsh words for council members who call for more cops but vote against tax increases.

"Today, the citizens of St. Paul saw some true leadership at work among members of the City Council to really make public safety a Number 1 issue in the city, to do what they needed to do to get additional resources into areas that are struggling with crime and other problems," Coleman said after the vote.

But, Coleman added, he was "deeply puzzled" by council members who advocate for more cops but have not voted to raise taxes above mayoral recommendations in the past, singling out Dan Bostrom and Debbie Montgomery.

The new officers would bring St. Paul's police force close to 600 members, its highest level in history. Police Chief John Harrington said he would identify the top three high-crime neighborhoods and assign three "long-term, sustainable beats" to each one. The officers could be on the streets by June 2007.

Although the city's crime rate is actually down compared with last year, there is a sense among many neighbors that crime is actually worsening. Harrington said the department's calls for service are about 300,000 annually, an all-time high.

The crime numbers could be misleading, St. Paul Police Federation President Dave Titus said at a news conference outside City Hall. Titus said a process called "advising," where officers check on an incident without making an official report, could be masking the true crime problem.

Harrington agreed with that view when it comes to quality-of-life crimes. Those types of crimes contribute to a sense of unease, Harrington said.

"Especially over on the East Side, where I talk to people a lot, that's what they're experiencing. This sense that life doesn't look like it's in control. It frightens people," the police chief said.

Less than a month ago, Bostrom, a former police officer who represents much of the East Side, kicked off a roiling debate at City Hall when the fiscal conservative came up with a plan to hire 20 officers — on top of the five proposed in Coleman's 2007 budget and paid for by a tax increase beyond the mayor's 8.6 percent hike.

That debate was fueled by neighborhood rallies intended to draw attention to neighborhood crime. The police union got involved, hiring Virginia-based campaign consultant Michael Shannon, who has experience running drives to build up police forces in several U.S. cities, including Minneapolis.

But Coleman and Council President Kathy Lantry said Bostrom's proposal was never viable because it took money from the police department's proposed overtime budget and only funded the officers for 10 months.

Bostrom fiercely defended his plan Wednesday, pointing out that the officers wouldn't start the police academy until March and that the overtime wouldn't be needed with more officers on the streets.

"Why should we soak our citizens for an extra two months when (the officers) aren't going to be on the street?" Bostrom asked.

The Coleman administration and Lantry rejected that argument, saying it was bad fiscal policy to build an automatic tax increase into the 2008 budget to pay for the new officers' full annual salaries.

Instead, Council Member Lee Helgen introduced the same 9.9 percent tax increase Bostrom proposed but sought only 11 officers beyond the mayor's original proposal of five.

Bostrom called the move "ridiculous" and voted against it. Montgomery, also a former police officer, joined him and

Council Member Pat Harris, who said paying for more officers could be done through budget cuts.

The political repercussions of Wednesday's vote and the activity leading up to it may echo for some time.

The union's campaign did not sit well with the mayor's office. The police federation set up a Web site ([www.2fewcops.com](http://www.2fewcops.com)) and distributed slick brochures showing a map of gang activity and pictures of crime scene tape and an overturned toy car. The brochure warned that Minneapolis crime could migrate to St. Paul and listed the telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of City Council members.

Media coverage of neighborhood anti-crime rallies — partly supported by the union — was extensive, and e-mails sent by residents through the new Web site started pouring into council offices this week.

On Tuesday, Coleman sent a letter to union head Titus repeating a commitment to hire 100 officers by 2009. But he also called the campaign "negative" and "misleading" and said Titus' support of the rallies and Web site is "baffling."

"It is cause for me to question your judgment, integrity, leadership and the sincerity of your campaign," Coleman wrote.

Titus defended his role, saying the police union's involvement in the rallies was minimal.

"To say that the federation ran this rally and developed this rally is an insult to all the citizens that have concerns about public safety and are voicing their concerns, period," Titus said Wednesday. "All I can say is I'm happy that we're moving toward the goal" of adding more than 100 police officers to the force.

But the union campaign was extensive, even recruiting high-profile St. Paul DFL lawmaker Matt Entenza to spearhead its efforts.

And to some extent, it was successful. Support on the council for even more taxes to pay for more officers appeared unanimous, despite what was already the biggest proposed tax increase in decades. The question always involved how many to add.

Shannon said he convened several groups of residents to ask how much they would be willing to pay for more cops. The answers were overwhelming, he said, with some people offering to pay as much as \$150 a year.

"Over and over and over again, what came up was that, 'We don't want to go through what Minneapolis folks are going through,'" Shannon said.

Jason Hoppin can be reached at [jhoppin@pioneerpress.com](mailto:jhoppin@pioneerpress.com) or 651-292-1892.

At a glance

With several taxing authorities setting their maximum levies this week, St. Paul homeowners now have a better picture of what their tax bills will look like next year. The total bill likely will go up 18 percent, to \$1,851, an increase of \$284 for a home with an estimated market value of about \$200,000. The taxing groups still can make adjustments to their levies but can't raise them.

Here's the breakdown of the \$284 increase:

**City of St. Paul:** 9.9 percent increase, or about \$55

**Ramsey County:** 6.2 percent increase, or about \$107

**St. Paul School District:** 16 percent increase, or about \$118\*

**St. Paul Port Authority:** 30 percent increase, or about \$3