

Last update: August 16, 2006 – 8:54 PM

## **Call for more police feeds DFL attack**

East Side residents pleaded for more officers, a message that DFL legislators quickly seized upon to criticize Gov. Tim Pawlenty.

**Howie Padilla And Dane Smith**, Star Tribune staff writers

Some sidewalks and streets on the East Side of St. Paul were marked with chalk outlines Wednesday -- a plea for law enforcement help from the area's beleaguered residents.

"They're telling us they're doing all they can. They're not," said Mick Kieffer, holding a sign labeling Mayor Chris Coleman and City Council members as arrogant.

Kieffer, a Railroad Island neighborhood resident, and others called for city officials to hire 200 more police officers during the next two years. About 150 residents carried signs and wore T-shirts with messages that warned what life might be like without more cops.

"Bullets Are Fly'n/People Are Dyin'," read one shirt's slogan, above a caricature of a dead man.

A couple of miles away at the State Capitol, DFL legislators seized on the East Side protest to press one of their central claims in the 2006 campaigns: that Republican Gov. Tim Pawlenty's budget cuts have endangered public safety and at the same time forced unacceptable property-tax increases.

At a news conference, about a half-dozen state representatives from St. Paul and Dakota County alleged that Pawlenty had cut local government aid since 2002 by more than \$800 million, forcing cuts in police forces and shifting the burden of public safety and other local services from state taxes to property taxes.

"It's hurting people in my neighborhoods," said Rep. John Lesch, DFL-St. Paul, who attended the rally and represents parts of the North End and East Side.

Lesch, a city prosecutor, said he has heard from domestic violence victims that they can't get the help they need and are worried about delayed responses from police.

The legislators said that recent proposals for property-tax increases by the mayor are a direct result of cuts forced through by Pawlenty and the Republican-controlled House.

Although the cuts in state aid have been partly restored as the budget crisis

has eased, local governments are victims of a volatile formula and an inability to predict how much they will receive one year to the next, the legislators said.

The Pawlenty administration's response is that the state faced a massive budget shortage in 2003 and that both state and local governments had to share the pain.

Some creative local governments managed to avoid cuts in essential public safety services, the governor has said, while others failed to meet the challenge. Pawlenty has singled out DFL-led cities such as Minneapolis for funding neighborhood revitalization programs and cutting too much from the police department.

Although the DFL legislators roundly condemned the \$800 million in cuts, none offered a specific proposal for a tax hike or other revenue increases that might restore pre-2003 local government aid formulas.

In St. Paul, Coleman has pledged to hire an additional five officers next year. But Kieffer said that he and other elected officials should make good on former Mayor Randy Kelly's promises of a much larger increase.

Kelly promised last year to hire an additional 25 officers, but Coleman has said that budget constraints make that impossible.

Kieffer said that on a recent night he and his wife were accosted by a group of about six youths. When they called police, they waited and waited but never saw an officer.

He doesn't blame the police, though. He said more officers are needed to make the department more proactive in fighting crime, not just reactive.

While police officials said some of the messages at the rally were extreme, they agreed with the need for a larger police force. Police Chief John Harrington has repeatedly argued that his department, with just more than 550 sworn officers, is understaffed by about 100 officers.

Although crime on the East Side is actually down from last year, spokesman Tom Walsh said, St. Paul officials are concerned that as Minneapolis beefs up its police force, more criminals will find their way to St. Paul.

"We've moved some people around to help us out this year," Walsh said.

"But we can't continue to do that. It will catch up with us."

[hpadilla@startribune.com](mailto:hpadilla@startribune.com) • 651-298-1551 [rdsmith@startribune.com](mailto:rdsmith@startribune.com) • 651-292-0164