

Public safety, video were front and center at City Hall



THE CITY BEAT

GEORGE
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Posted by George Hostetter on January 20, 2015

Ten thoughts on a busy day spent covering Fresno City Hall:

1.) Police Chief Jerry Dyer at an early-afternoon news conference announced a major expansion of his department's on-body cameras program, ushering in a new era for Fresno (and Fresno County) law enforcement.

The number of officers with body cameras used to be measured in the dozens. It eventually will be measured in the hundreds.

Dyer said the key to covering the initial investment for all these cameras is a \$500,000 donation from someone wishing to remain anonymous. Dyer thanked the donor, adding that he couldn't find the right words to explain what motivated the person's deed.

It's simple, I thought: Civic virtue.

2.) The public-policy value of cameras in tense situations is no secret to City Hall. The city in mid-2013 razed four large downtown homeless camps after making valiant efforts to find alternative housing for the homeless.

Such clean-ups in the past usually got City Hall into legal trouble. The homeless and their advocates said city officials in these clean-ups abused their authority and destroyed personal property.

City officials in the 2013 clean-ups wore body cameras to record everything. The camps disappeared. City Hall didn't get hit with a big legal judgment.

Video isn't perfect. But all things considered, it's good have in a pinch.

3.) Dyer even before Tuesday's news conference was headed toward 105 body cameras -- five for officers on the city's Homeless Task Force and 100 authorized by the City Council last year.

The donation should boost the camera total toward the 400 range, Dyer said. The Chief said just about every officer who deals routinely with the public eventually will wear a body camera while on duty.

I got a sense from Dyer's comments that no other municipal police force in Fresno County can say that. I'm guessing the pressure on those departments to get cameras will only grow.

4.) Sheriff Margaret Mims is aware of Dyer's program.

"We're researching it right now," she said of body cameras for deputies.

Mims said her department has about 400 deputy sheriffs. More than 100 are assigned to court services. Just over 100 have patrol duties.

"I do think it's the future of law enforcement," Mims said of the cameras.

5.) Complaints at the county jail dropped significantly when more cameras were added, Mims said.

Cameras, she said, can help in "proving or disproving allegations of misconduct," she said.

But, Mims added, body cameras raise several issues for her department. One is long-term cost for things such as storage. Another is developing teamwork with the District Attorney's Office, which would use the video in court. There's also the need to come up with an in-house policy for when, where, how to use the cameras.

Bottom line: Mims is keeping an eye on Dyer's body-camera program.

"I'm waiting to see how it all rolls out," she said.

6.) Fresno has a lot of county islands. They're patrolled by Mims' deputies.

The urban bad guys don't care about jurisdictional boundaries.

Will the day come when Fresno police and sheriff's deputies respond to the same high-profile incident only to have legal/social/political trouble arise because the latter didn't have body cameras?

7.) About an hour after the body-camera meeting, Dyer held another news conference at department headquarters. This one concerned the shooting death of Janessa Ramirez. The 9-year-old was killed Sunday night by a stray bullet. Janessa almost certainly was a victim of gang violence.

Stacey Gonzales, Janessa's mother, and District 1 Council Member Esmeralda Soria were among those also attending the news conference.

Police have received 17 tips so far. Dyer said the department needs people with inside knowledge of the crime to step forward.

Gonzales said she wants justice for her daughter. The media room at police headquarters was packed with officers, reporters and Janessa's family. For long seconds, the only sound was the weeping of Gonzales.

8.) Janessa was struck by the bullet at a retail area near Marks and Clinton avenues. The spot is in District 3, represented by Council President Oliver Baines. Soria represents District 1, which isn't far away.

Soria has been on the council for less than two weeks. She succeeded Blong Xiong, who was termed out after serving eight years.

There's a reward for information leading to the arrest of Janessa's killer. It was \$5,000. Soria said she is donating \$5,000 from District 1 council office budget. She said Fresno County Supervisor Henry R. Perea and Assembly Member Henry T. Perea are each donating \$5,000. She said a businessman is donating \$2,500.

The reward is now \$22,500.

Soria at one point comforted the distraught Stacey Gonzales as Dyer spoke.

Soria at the microphone may have spoken a bit too softly to be fully effective. But her comments were suitably brief and sincere.

The news conference wasn't about politics. But, like it or not, Soria now lives in a world where everything is political. She handled herself with skill and modesty.

9.) A short distance to the east of the intersection of Clinton and Marks is the intersection of Clinton and Weber.

It was at a pizza parlor near Clinton/Weber that three people died in a shooting on Dec. 28, 1995. John Vang, 16, Ka Yeng "Debbie" Her, 13, and Roxanne Abrahamian, 32, were killed. Abrahamian was about 75 yards away from the

restaurant when the shooting began but was in the line of fire.

Fresno has seen too many homicides in the last two decades. But those pizza parlor killings in 1995 have stayed in my mind all these years. Maybe it's the neighborhood. Mid-State Bowl used to be at Clinton and Weber. The building was torn down and the site was to be turned into a shopping center with the help of City Hall's Redevelopment Agency.

The shopping center never got built and the RDA has been disbanded.

Seems like this area -- Clinton/Weber, Clinton/Marks -- can't catch a break.

One last point about the pizza parlor killings of 1995. Near as I can tell from The Bee's files, the killers still have not been caught and brought to justice.

10.) For the final thought, let's return to video.

Dyer made clear at the Janessa Ramirez news conference that police wish they had more video from the area where the shots were fired. Such video could provide important clues, Dyer said.

The police department had (as of January 2014) 177 video cameras located in high-crime or strategically-sensitive areas throughout the city. These cameras are mounted on things like light poles and buildings. They run 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

I asked Dyer about the presence of police video cameras in the area of Fresno located west of Highway 99 and north of Belmont/Roeding Park. This area includes the intersection where Janessa was shot.

Dyer was cautious in his response. I assume he didn't want to alert criminals to neighborhoods where video policing doesn't exist.

But it was obvious from Dyer's comments that the Police Department's video camera presence in the fast-growing area west of 99 is weak.

This might be a worthy public-policy issue for Soria and her council colleagues.

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