

Fresno's new crime-fighting ally: trash cops

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Fresno has a new ally in the fight against crime — trash.

The city plans to hire three cops whose mission is to ensure scavengers don't make a mess of things by diving into curbside recycling bins.

But that's just the start. The officers also expect to put a dent in the robberies, burglaries and blight still plaguing a city on the path to restoration.

What makes this effort unusual is the funding. The three officers will be paid with money tied to the age-old municipal challenge of collecting garbage.

Who said City Hall isn't creative?

"It's going to be a win-win, not only for the Police Department and Sanitation, but for the citizens of Fresno, as well," Police Chief Jerry Dyer says. "We're going to have an increased police presence in our neighborhoods, and we're going to address some of the issues with illegal dumping."

Public Utilities Director Thomas Esqueda, who oversees residential trash collection, says the "trash" cops team is another step in Mayor Ashley Swearingin's initiative to revitalize older neighborhoods.

"It's part of the Restore Fresno effort," Esqueda says. "It will work."

The program's inspiration is no secret to any veteran of local life.

We know many of the scavengers are opportunists for criminal activity. In addition to going into the bins, they sometimes go into a vehicle and commit a theft.

Police Chief Jerry Dyer

Residential trash bins, especially the blue ones full of recyclables, contain items easily turned into cash at recycling centers. Fresno has plenty of frugal-minded people, including the homeless. It's a simple, though labor-intensive, task for someone with a shopping cart to troll through a neighborhood on the night before the garbage trucks rumble by and come away with a nice haul.

These people, deemed "scavengers" by city officials careful in their choice of words, all too often leave two types of wakes.

The first is litter. Scavengers dig through bins in search of commodities. It's not their job to worry about where the dross winds up.

The second is crime. It's 4 a.m. No one else is out and about. Just a few feet from the trash bins is a nice car in the driveway. Perhaps it's unlocked, with something tempting on the front seat.

Residents and city officials alike find this intolerable.

Dyer and Esqueda met recently to craft a solution.

Dyer came with a full agenda.

The city only last year emerged from the Great Recession. The budget crisis saw the city's roster of sworn police officers drop from about 850 to barely 700. Swearing in her new \$1.2 billion budget promises to boost that figure to 760 by July 2016. The general fund, money spent at the discretion of elected officials, will foot most of the bill.

But the general fund is far from 100% healthy. It's pushed and pulled by competing demands. Every dollar saved immediately finds a new use.

At the same time, Dyer is struggling with an ominous uptick in certain types of crime. Violent crime in general and robberies in particular are a scourge. The chief is keen on getting more officers on patrol. Eyes on the street and building neighborhood relationships are two prominent themes.

Finally, Dyer in August will celebrate his 14th year as chief. This in itself isn't relevant to the problem of bin-diving scavengers. But it does underscore Dyer's survival skills at City Hall. Swearing in's passion is for reinvigorating every struggling neighborhood south of the San Joaquin River. That means improving their quality of life.

Dyer can take a hint.

We will get more police officers in the community, and we'll help everyone with this health and safety issue.

Public Utilities Director Thomas Esqueda

Esqueda came to the parley with a hefty agenda, too.

Those blue residential recycling bins take on an interesting life in the real world. They're usually sitting at the curb next to their gray mates designated only for trash. The typical scavenger begins with the blue bin, then heads to the gray bin on the off chance it has something good. Nonrecyclable stuff from the gray bin gets thrown into the blue bin.

Presto! The blue bin is "contaminated." Esqueda says the city's contamination rate is inching up. About 15% of the stuff in blue bins used to be trash destined for the landfill. It's now in the 25% range. Esqueda says this is bad news for City Hall's effort to get top dollar for its recyclables.

Scavengers don't get all the blame. But they get some.

Then there's the law of averages. The trash-truck drivers have tight schedules. Inevitably, the drivers come up to a bin just as a scavenger begins digging. Esqueda says a driver request to move doesn't always work. If conflict is to happen, Esqueda adds, it's better to have the public represented by a trained police officer who can help the scavenger get public services if needed.

The trucks also are big. No driver has hit a scavenger. But, Esqueda says, it's bound to happen if something isn't done.

Finally, Esqueda has both eyes squarely on the same mayoral "Restore Fresno" initiative that got Dyer's attention.

"It's a public health and safety issue for us," Esqueda says. "And it's got our contamination rate up."

Imaginative use of money

The first chore for Esqueda and Dyer was finding money. Esqueda says the annual cost for three cops (plus equipment) is in the \$375,000 range.

The state sends money every year to push proper recycling.

City Hall gets money from the company handling its recyclables.

Residential ratepayers send in checks once a month to fund a smooth-running operation.

Take a little from each pot and you've got three cops.

The next chore is execution.

Dyer says the three cops will be part of the city's homeless task force. Headed by Sgt. Robert Dewey, the unit includes four police officers plus employees from code enforcement and community sanitation.

Dyer expects the three Public Utilities-funded officers to be on duty this fall. Dewey, Dyer and Esqueda will decide how best to use them. The one certainty is that they'll be in the field a lot.

There will be no bureaucratic battles over territory, Esqueda promises. If a Public Utilities-funded officer spots a scavenger at work and gets a call for help of a serious nature in the area, he says, "they go to the emergency."

Spoiling for a fight

Trash, scavengers, crime, blight, quality of life, justice, politics — the connection is nothing new in Fresno.

It only seems so, Esqueda cautions, because the long economic downturn temporarily weakened the police-public utilities partnership.

Yet, there's fresh anger at City Hall these days for recycling centers. This hit the boiling point Thursday when the City Council approved a resolution asking Sacramento legislators to amend state recycling law.

Such law, the resolution states, "is damaging to California cities by causing crime and public nuisances in areas surrounding recycling centers and interferes with the City's ability to freely regulate harmful businesses."

This lets Sacramento know that Fresno is struggling with some of their plans.

Council Member Steve Brandau on a resolution asking the state to amend its recycling laws

Recycling is a great idea, said Council Member Steve Brandau, who sponsored the resolution, but "it has led to a lot of crime. For me, it's the law of unintended consequences."

Recycling centers took the brunt of council frustration. Yet, what can City Hall do? The fact that the council had to be content with sending the resolution to local state lawmakers underscores City Hall's impotence on a state, if not national, issue.

Esqueda and Dyer are focused on their own domain.

Esqueda says he'll wait to see if the program works before considering an expansion to the commercial side. The finances would be more complex because commercial accounts are handled by private haulers Allied Waste and Mid Valley Disposal.

Dyer, too, preaches prudence. For example, contracted cops boost the total number of officers. Fresno Area Express and Fresno Unified School District fund positions in return for specific services.

But, the chief adds, there's no substitute for officers paid from the general fund. They go where they're needed, when they're needed, no questions asked.

Still, the brand name notwithstanding, city officials aren't turning up their noses at three "trash" cops.

Their presence on the streets of Fresno, Dyer says, "is another step forward."

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