

Fresno City Council to debate police recruitment plan

By George Hostetter
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City Hall is touting a potential recruiting incentive for perhaps the best job round — Fresno police officer.

A handful of top city officials gathered Tuesday at City Hall to push a plan that would pay \$10,000 to qualified peace officers who leave their old job and join the Fresno police force.

The plan also would pay \$1,000 to Fresno officers who find such veteran recruits.

The deal, which takes the form of an addition to the police union's contract, goes to the City Council on Thursday.

"The lack of qualified candidates, along with our Police Department's higher employment standards, makes it difficult to recruit or attract new hires at a time when cities are competing against each other to retain and attract the best candidates," City Manager Bruce Rudd said.

"Thanks to the cooperation by the Fresno Police Officers Association, we have a plan in place to make our hiring process for future police officers much more competitive."

Police Chief Jerry Dyer said the need to beef up the force, especially with experienced officers, "is extremely urgent."

Improving hiring incentives is the only way we can attract and recruit qualified officers.

Fresno City Council Member Steve Brandau

Council Members Lee Brand and Steve Brandau, sponsors of the deal along with Rudd, were on hand to lend support.

The incentives, Brand said, will "enable us to meet our sworn officer staffing goals."

Brandau said the incentives "will put Fresno police on a path of success."

FPOA President Jacky Parks said a wise expansion of the department is needed because officers currently are "doing more with less."

The proposal has two key incentives for what Dyer calls "lateral hires." The first is 40 hours of vacation and 40 hours of sick leave right out the chute for the new officer. The second is a \$10,000 bonus, paid in four checks of \$2,500 each. The recruit would have to stick around for two years to get the full amount.

The \$1,000 referral bonus for current cops would be paid on the same schedule, but in amounts of \$250 each.

The dynamic at play is familiar to anyone who sat through June's budget hearings or read the recent investigation by The Bee.

The central event was the Great Recession that began pressing on City Hall finances in 2008. A police force with nearly 850 authorized positions suffered a stunning rate of annual attrition. Dyer's roster of sworn cops occasionally dipped below 700. Officials on Tuesday said the number now stands at 706.

Is this true?

FPOA President Jacky Parks on the most common response when outside peace officers hear about the \$10,000

bonus

Mayor Ashley Swearengin's 2015-16 budget calls for 760 sworn officers by next June. Fresno needs the extra service. Dyer said violent crime is inching up after four years of decline. With the recession now in the rearview mirror Fresno, though hardly out of budgetary hot water, has money to pay them.

But where to find all the new officers?

Dyer said the department has revived up its production system for brand new police. But, he added, his preferred expansion formula is 50-50 — half rookies, half veterans from elsewhere.

Veterans, Dyer said, are in a strong negotiating spot. After all, they've already got the stability of a paycheck, workplace status, home.

The proposed incentive program is designed to recalibrate the cost-benefit analyses of experienced peace officers when they think of Fresno.

But there was another theme to comments at Tuesday's news conference. It came to the surface late in the event.

The preceding had consisted of one lament after another. Poaching lots of lateral hires is hard work.

But when you get right down to the nitty-gritty, Dyer said, being a police officer in Fresno is great. There's variety in assignment. Promotion always beckons for the talented. The pay will keep the family well fed. The retirement check will please. And, the chief said, the job will challenge the professional skills and nurture the civic virtue of every man and woman who got into the profession for the right reason.

"Those are the things that stimulate people and keep them in the organization," Dyer said.

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