

Budget handcuffs police and sheriff

By David Brown
Of the Emerald

Cost may become a factor in whether the Eugene Police Department investigates a crime. "And that's a lousy way to run a police business," says Chief James Packard.

Packard, an average-sized man, speaks slowly and deliberately. He moves to the drawing board for explanations, his desk for official opinions, and the conference table to explain the statistical sheet. Despite the bad news, Packard is ready to share a friendly laugh.

With foresight, Packard plotted a smooth course through recent budget cuts in the Eugene Police Department's overall budget. The reductions took a toll of 13 percent in personnel and extensive spending cuts. Overall, the Department's budget reduction totaled 15 percent.

He explains that the personnel reductions began mid-way through the last fiscal year in anticipation of the July cuts to the city's budget.

Packard effectively trimmed a force of 229 employees and officers by 30 positions through choosing not to fill positions as they opened, canceling overtime pay, and laying-off eight officers. The eight officers were offered lower paying jobs in administration, says Packard. Six officers accepted those jobs.

"Our main concern, however, has been that we maintain our uniform patrol strength as near to the same level as is currently being experienced in the city. So our response time to life-threatening and property-threatening calls, we're hoping, will not decrease by one fraction of a second."

A lower number of patrol cars will be available to respond to life-threatening calls. So lower priority calls may be held in "communications" until a car reaches the area.

"I might have a unit tied-up or I might have only one or two units available in the city at that point," Packard says.

"Depending on how it goes later on down the line," he continues, "there will be some requests from the public that we have traditionally responded to that we may have to eliminate entirely."

Along with personnel cuts from 45 to 32 authorized detectives, travel money



Photo by Jay Jollon

Fourteen patrol cars will be auctioned off to provide money for vehicle repairs. If there is enough money made, the department can replace only one vehicle.

used for extradition and investigation of cases fell from \$31,000 to \$15,000. "That figure scares me," Packard says. "There will be some cases that we feel should be investigated that will not be investigated because we won't have the manpower. For lack of a better method, in some cases, we'll set dollar limits."

"But crimes of violence will continue to be investigated fully. The indecent exposure and those minor — if you want to call any sex offense minor — things we will probably not be able to investigate anymore."

Joint investigations of some crimes will also be affected by recent cuts in the Sheriff's Department. Packard doesn't think anyone knows what impact those cuts will have. But "impacts from cuts in the District Attorney's Office are liable to be significant," he says. Such cuts may hinder prosecutions.

Sheriff David Burks has complaints on his own budget, which is part of Lane County's battered budget.

"We just aren't going to have the people to work joint investigations," Burks says.

Burks speaks candidly, saying the Eugene police don't know what a real budget cut is. "It's just that we're, if anything, jealous," he adds.

He says he will have only four detectives when one comes back from sick leave this week.

"A year ago yesterday I had 63 more positions than I have today. And they (The Lane County Board of Commissioners) are still talking about up to a million dollars that they want to get out of this department. There's just no way."

Of those 63 positions, 30 were patrolmen.

Burks explains that his department now has about two cars on patrol per shift in the Eugene-Springfield metropolitan area. "We used to run about 12 cars."

"If River Road and Santa Clara were a city, it would be the seventh largest city in the state of Oregon. And we have the whole thing to take care of. We just can't take care of it as it should be."

The Sheriff's Department underwent county cuts totaling 21 percent of the department's budget. This is Burks' third

budget reduction in as many years.

Recently, a suspect arrested for burglarly admitted coming to Lane County because of cuts in law enforcement budgets. The suspect reportedly said "the word had spread throughout Olympia (Washington) that there were no policemen left in Lane County."

Although the Lane Interagency Narcotics Team which apprehended him has now been disbanded, Burks said that a similar idea among criminals could still be prevalent.

"His big mistake was that he went in on a silent alarm and of course that gives us a little time to get there." But if only two cars are out and they are tied-up "we may have to let an alarm go."

"There is no question that people who have ill thoughts in mind know that the chances of being caught by a Sheriff's deputy, or even seeing one, is getting to be minimal. The county will become a haven and sanctuary for criminals to prey off the citizens of Eugene and Springfield."

Burks admits that those are strong words but adds he is being strangled by the budget and prevented from doing his "lawful mandate."

Burks says he hopes for voter approval on an August referendum of a county levy to increase funds for his office, the District Attorney's office, and the juvenile detention center.

In an attempt to keep costs down, the Sheriff's Department expanded a neighborhood watch program consisting of 1,400 people. Burks says that such an organization can't operate without response from a well-staffed department. He adds that these volunteers represent the only crime prevention program left in his area.

Packard picks up a list of spending cuts. The department is taking out phones and re-evaluating the entire phone system to hold the phone bill down. Fourteen patrol cars will be auctioned off to provide money for vehicle repairs. And, if there is enough money made at the auction, the department can replace only one vehicle. Mailing expenses were \$500 for the year.

The list goes on. "I think it's going to be stress and tension time for several years for all of us," Packard says with a slight grimace.

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