

Elgin to bring back police

By DICK MASON
The Observer

ELGIN — A major change on the law enforcement front is looming in Elgin.

The Elgin City Council voted on Wednesday, May 18, not to renew its contract with the Union County Sheriff's Office for enhanced law enforcement services and plans to add back its own police department, one it disbanded about 10 years ago.

"We intend to have a police chief hired by July 1," said Brock Eckstein, Elgin's city administrator.

The police chief would come on board after the contract the city of Elgin has with the Union County Sheriff's Office expires at the end of June. Elgin, under the terms of its current contract, is presently receiving 420 hours of enhanced law enforcement services per month from the Union County Sheriff's Office. Much of this is in the form of regular patrols by deputies. Without a contract for enhanced services Elgin would receive periodic patrols from Union County Sheriff's deputies but significantly less service than it does now.

Eckstein said the city council voted not to renew its contract with the Union County Sheriff's Office because state regulations are preventing it from serving the city as well as it could. One reason, he said, is that a county agency cannot cite people on charges of violating city ordinances.

For example, Eckstein said the sheriff's office cannot enforce a city ordinance such as one addressing the use of motorcycles and all terrain vehicles in town. He said there are times when people ride motorcycles in town that lack mirrors and turn signals required by a city ordinance. Sheriff's deputies, however, are unable to cite these motorcyclists for ordinance violations because they are not with the city of Elgin.

Eckstein said that when Elgin has its own police department, its officers will be able to cite such motorcyclists and all people violating city ordinances. He said the city council's decision does not reflect dissatisfaction with the quality of work the deputies are doing.

"We have received very good service," Eckstein said.



Deputy Morris Capers, with the Union County Sheriff's Office, checks out the Elgin Stampede Grounds during his patrol on Friday, May 20, 2022.



Morris Capers, a Union County sheriff's deputy, makes a call on his radio on Friday, May 20, 2022, while on patrol in Elgin.

Mayor supports the move

Elgin's mayor, Risa Hallgarth, supports the step the city of Elgin is taking.

"I think it is a very positive move," Hallgarth said.

Like Eckstein, she said the sheriff's office is doing a good job but she believes it is time to make a change.

"We like the deputies we had and we appreciate the job they did, but it is time to move on," Hallgarth said.

The mayor added she believes Eckstein will do well with the budgeting work needed to start a new police department. She credits Eckstein with being good at things like landing grants for the city.

Union County Sheriff Cody Bowen said that while his deputies are unable to cite people on charges of violating city ordinances because they are with

a county agency, the deputies can often enforce such violations indirectly since in many cases people violating ordinances also are breaking state laws. He noted that underage youths riding motorcycles in town without a helmet, mirrors and signal lights are also violating state laws that can be enforced by deputies.

Bowen said that over the past two years his office has received just two complaints about people riding motorcycles or ATVs in Elgin that are in violation of the city's code.

He said one of the instances in which county deputies cannot enforce city ordinances via state laws is when the issue involves animal control. He said because Elgin has an animal control ordinance, deputies cannot enforce the county's ordinance.

"A city ordinance trumps a county

Dick Mason/The Observer



Hallgarth



Bowen

ordinance," Bowen said.

This means that when a dog is at large, the city of Elgin's ordinance officer must handle the case. Dog bites are the only animal control issues sheriff's deputies can handle in Elgin, Bowen said. He noted though that previously when the city of Elgin did not have an ordinance officer for two

months, arrangements were made for the deputies to assist with enforcing Elgin's animal control ordinance.

A one-year freeze

The contract set to expire at the end of June is a one-year \$343,000 pact. This is the same as what Elgin paid for enhanced law enforcement services in 2020-21. Bowen said he agreed to the freeze to help Elgin with budget issues it was experiencing in part because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bowen said the contract the sheriff's office offered this spring was a three-year pact that would charge Elgin about \$348,000 in 2022-23, \$358,000 in 2023-24 and \$368,000 in 2024-25.

Elgin would again receive 420 hours of enhanced law enforcement services each month under the terms of the contract if the city council changed direction and decided to renew its contract with the Union

County Sheriff's Office.

Bowen said there are many months when Elgin receives more than the 420 hours it pays for. He said that in April Elgin received 500 hours of service and in March it received 499 hours. The extra hours were needed to allow deputies to finish and follow up on criminal cases.

"When the 420-hour mark is reached they don't just stop. They have to keep on and close cases," said Bowen, who noted that his department will have to lay off three deputies if the Elgin contract is not renewed.

The sheriff said overtime has to be paid to deputies when they work extra hours, money that comes out of the UCSO budget rather than being passed on to the city of Elgin. He noted that when Elgin starts its own police department, it will be responsible for paying police officers' overtime.

The sheriff's concerns

This is one reason Bowen believes that if Elgin does create its own police department, it would end up paying considerably more for law enforcement than it does now. He said start-up costs including the purchase of vehicles, uniforms and equipment plus annual liability insurance and dispatch center fees would also balloon the city's law enforcement budget.

Finding people willing to serve as officers is another hurdle the city of Elgin would face.

"Nobody wants to get into law enforcement now," Bowen said.

He believes it will be difficult to recruit people certified to work in law enforcement or individuals now working in the field who would be willing to come to Union County.

Bowen noted that one county in Eastern Oregon is so desperate to find deputies that it is offering \$10,000 hiring bonuses but is still having a difficult time getting applicants.

The sheriff also said another drawback Elgin would face if it starts its own police department is that it will no longer receive the same level of help from the Union County Sheriff's Office.

"It will have to shoulder everything," Bowen said.

Not surprisingly, the sheriff does not believe the Elgin City Council is making a wise decision.

"I do not think that it will be in the best interest of Elgin," Bowen said.

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