

RIVERSIDE COUNTY: Board moves closer to public safety spending review

The sheriff has been wary of the study, which would be done by an outside party.

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Riverside County supervisors and Sheriff Stan Sniff continue to differ over the value of a planned review of the county's public safety expenses, with supervisors calling it a fresh look to find savings and **the sheriff blaming board-approved pay hikes for boosting his costs.**

Meanwhile, at least one supervisor questioned whether cities that rely on the sheriff for police protection pay their fair share.

The Board of Supervisors last week took another step toward having an outside firm conduct a comprehensive study of how the county spends its public safety dollars. The review's costs are not yet clear, but the timeline calls for a firm to be chosen by late September.

The review will examine the Sheriff's Department, the District Attorney's Office, the public defender's office and the Probation Department. The Fire Department is not included because it is the subject of a separate study.

The call for review arose amid complaints by the 17 cities with contracts for sheriff's services over a 7 percent increase in their contract rates. Several cities have said contract costs are becoming hard to afford.

Supervisors, who control the sheriff's budget, also are concerned with public safety taking a growing share of the money directly controlled by the board. In fiscal 2005-06, public safety expenditures took up 58 percent of county discretionary spending. Today, it's 67 percent and projected to grow.

"That trend has to stop before other county departments are decimated, forcing massive layoffs and leaving residents with drastically reduced services," Supervisor John Benoit wrote in a [June 26 op-ed in The Press-Enterprise](#).

Sniff, an elected official, has expressed qualms about the review, fearing it could expose information that could be used against the county, especially in lawsuits.

'SEE THE GPA'

In a [July 2 Press-Enterprise op-ed](#), Sniff wrote there's "nothing mysterious" about why public safety costs are rising.

"That reality is this: The county's fiscal woes stem from a series of large, annual, compounding salary hikes granted by the county to labor unions over the past eight years – even during the recession and with no input from the department heads on the size and likely consequences of such disbursements at a time of slumping

revenue,” he wrote.

Supervisors in 2012 agreed to raises in exchange for union concessions to quell what county officials said were unsustainable pension costs.

An audit “might help on the margins,” Sniff added. “Provided it is truly independent, objective and does not merely deflect attention from the elephant in the room. And that elephant, of course, is immovable: What can auditors do to alter personnel and labor costs – already fixed and determined by the county’s multiyear labor agreements – which directly account for 82 percent of the sheriff’s budget?”

Sheriff’s officials were more conciliatory last week.

“The sheriff agreed this past month to fully support, cooperate and collaborate on any lawful audit areas, and any and all requests for information to that end,” they wrote in an email. “We also look forward to the performance metrics the county seeks, as the Sheriff’s Department already is accountable to a wide array of local, county, state and federal stakeholders and frequent audits by those external authorities.”

County Executive Officer Jay Orr, a board appointee, compared the review to parents wanting to know their kids’ college grades.

“You want to see the GPA at some point to see what the performance measures are on” what you’re spending, he told supervisors July 7.

“You simply cannot as a department head, elected or not, once the dollars are appropriated, not undergo scrutiny by appropriating bodies,” he said. “It happens in every level of government, no matter how sensitive the mission of the department or government body is.”

Supervisor John Tavaglione said Sniff’s department, in the past three fiscal years, approved \$18 million in overtime expenses.

Sheriff’s officials said overtime went up due to a hiring freeze and public safety realignment, which shifted responsibility for certain low-level offenders from the state to counties.

“The overtime sustained by the department during this time, had been projected ahead and repeatedly reported by the sheriff, on the record, before the Board of Supervisors, and has been audited by outside authorities,” the department said in an email. Much of the overtime is reimbursed through noncounty sources, officials added.

The review also should look at the practice of deputies trading shifts so they can earn overtime, Tavaglione said.

The department responded: “Any investigative finding of misuse in work scheduling to manipulate inappropriate access to overtime is subject to disciplinary action.”