

Sentiment favoring free-standing Lathrop Police department?

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LATHROP – Lathrop's contract with the San Joaquin County Sheriff's Office for police services has been approved for another year, the shortest extension since 1990 when the barely six-month-old incorporated city tapped the county for community policing.

At the same time, after listening to the results of a police service study on the best and most cost-effective policing approach for the city, the three City Council members present (Mayor Kristy Sayles was absent and the fifth seat is vacant) voted Tuesday night to hold three town hall meetings at different locations to receive input from the rest of the taxpayers who were not among the "focus group" that was selected at random by the consulting firm that the city paid \$3,000 to do the study. A further discussion of the details contained in the study will be part of the town hall meetings which are to be held in the Community Center at Valverde Park, Lathrop High School, and Lathrop City Hall with the dates to be determined.

The focus of the study was to compare the cost-effectiveness and feasibility of the following alternatives that the city could choose from in the delivery of police services:

- Lathrop to have its own police department.
- Stay with the status quo, which means maintaining and continuing the contract with the Sheriff's office.
- Share police services with another city.

There's plenty of number-crunching involved in any of the above alternatives, with all the numbers biting into each resident's pocket book. Each alternative will cost quite a bit of money, with some significant differences in numbers. Below are the scenarios for the three alternatives presented in the police services review.

Three police alternatives compared

1.Lathrop to have its own police department. Based on the study, Lathrop would need an annual budget of approximately \$5.5 million dollars to fund its own city Police Department. The expenses would include the following: \$4.9 million for direct costs such as salaries, benefits, operations, maintenance, and liability; an "assumed" \$300,000 to pay for services such as communications, records, and booking provided by the San Joaquin County Sheriff; and \$270,000 for city-wide administration and support such as human resources and legal services.

Those figures don't even include the transition costs, from Sheriff police services to city police department, of \$1.2 million. Transition period is approximately 12 months.

Estimated total cost for the city during the transition year: \$5.7 million (taking into account the current \$4.5 million plus the \$1.2 million transition costs). That figure, though, would be less under the decreased police services contractual budget of \$3.7 million for the 2010-11 fiscal year tentatively approved during the recent budget reviews.

2.Contracting with the City of Manteca would cost approximately \$4.6 million which would include: \$3.2 million for salaries and benefits; \$800,000 for estimated overtime costs and administrative overhead; and \$600,000 for the continuance of city personnel allocations, operations and the like. On top of that would be the estimated \$250,000 transition costs for approximately six months, for a grand total of \$4,850,000. The figures for a possible business marriage with the City of Tracy would be a total of \$4.4 million plus \$250,000 six-month transition costs for a grand total of \$4,650,000.

"These are just cost estimations at this point," Randy Tan, senior manager of Matrix consulting group of Palo Alto, clarified to the council explaining the figures given for contracting with Manteca and Tracy.

3.The third alternative would be maintaining status quo of having Sheriff's deputies to provide police services for the city.

Some of the half-dozen residents who addressed the council on this issue said they would prefer to see a Lathrop Police Department. It was also suggested that if the contract is maintained with the Sheriff's Office, the turnover of deputies to serve Lathrop should be increased from three years to five years to make the Police Services program a true community-policing.

One thing that some of the speakers emphasized, they don't want sharing police services with the City of Manteca, or Tracy for that matter.

"I don't want Lathrop to become eaten up by Manteca..., that's why we incorporated. We need to be Lathrop even if it costs us \$1 million. I don't want to become Manteca," resident Rosalinda Valencia stated. J. Chaka Santos was of the same mind. "I don't want Manteca; I don't need Manteca; and I don't need Tracy," he said, adding, "You think you're getting a sweet deal (with Manteca)? All you're getting is saccharine, not the real thing."

Connie Lum Perez, whose family has lived in Lathrop for more than 50 years, also believes that "we need to have our own police force" because "we need community policing" where the residents know their police officers and vice versa.

"I'm willing to pay a dollar more (in taxes) for police (services) so that a life can be saved," she said, referring to the death of her nephew, Jeremy Lum, who died last year which, the family continues to believe, was the result of the police not recognizing that he had a bipolar episode when he was arrested and taken to the county jail overnight. His body was found in the San Joaquin River days after that. Had the police called the family, he would be alive today, the family continues to maintain.

All three council members present agreed that holding the town hall meetings before making a decision on what alternative is best for the city.

"In the end, it's the taxpayers' money" that's involved, Vice Mayor Martha Salcedo said.

Below are the Lathrop Police Services highlights at a glance:

- The newly incorporated City of Lathrop (incorporation date was July 1, 1989) in 1990 contracted with the San Joaquin County Sheriff's Department to provide police services to the community.
- Lathrop population at incorporation: approximately 12,000.
- Since that time, the contract with the Sheriff's office has not been reviewed for cost-effectiveness.
- On October 6, 2009, the City Council directed staff to send out Request for Proposals to consulting firms for a Police Services Study to "evaluate alternative options, focus on pros and cons, lay out a strategic implementation plan, and provide detailed cost estimates."
- On Feb. 1, 2010, the council directed city manager to ink a contract with Matrix Consulting Group of Palo Alto for a police study at a cost of "not to exceed" \$30,000.
- June 21, 2010, a Matrix representative presents the results of the study to the City Council. Council accepts the report and votes unanimously (3-0 with Mayor Kristy Sayles absent, and with a fifth seat vacant) to schedule three town hall meetings to further discuss in detail the results of the study as well as to get more input from the citizens as to their police-service preferences – whether the city should establish its own police department, continue with the status quo which means keep the contract with the Sheriff's Office, or share police services with Manteca or Tracy or any other city in San Joaquin County.

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