

City cops to get canine helper

By STEVE STROTH
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After approving money to hire two new police officers, the Watsonville City Council went one step further than anyone expected last night by adding a dog to the police department — provided money can be raised to purchase and train the animal.

Council members were scheduled to consider a recommendation by City Manager John Radin to hire just two new police officers with money from the city's reserve. But the council on its own initiative decided to add a new canine police unit after approving the two new officers.

That came as a surprise to Police Chief Ray Belgard, who had asked the council to approve funds for seven new patrol officers, but figured his request last year for a canine unit would be lost in this year's budgeting shuffle.

"I really didn't expect it, but I'm glad to have it," Belgard said this morning.

Belgard had asked Radin to find funds for seven more patrol officers and two new staffers to handle reports and evidence-collection chores. But Radin said he could spare only \$56,000 from the city's reserve, for two patrol officers.

The council agreed, but also expressed a desire for still more officers if the money could be found. Radin was instructed to return in January with an update on the city's financial status to determine if money is available for more police officers.

Radin told the council there is a good chance that the money for more officers will be there by that time.

"I feel there must be some way that we can find some more money in this budget for more officers," Councilwoman Gwen Carroll said.

"I was in hopes that we would have more than two officers," Mayor Ann Soldo said.

Since Belgard expected only the two officers in Radin's compromise proposal, the canine unit came as a real bonus, he said.

The presence of a police dog gives an officer an added element of safety, Belgard said.

"It's definitely an added safety feature," he said. "It only stands to reason that only a fool would be likely to attack you if you have a dog."

Once the dog is in service, which Belgard estimated could be as soon as January, it will work only night shifts.

"We want to use it during the time when there is the greatest need for police service," Belgard said.

The question now is who will pay for the new dog.

Council members approved on a 4-3 vote Carroll's motion to support a canine-unit program if a trained dog could be donated to the Police Department.

Radin asked that donations be made to the city so the city could purchase the dog.

It will cost about \$5,000 to purchase and train a dog, and to train its handler. Another \$15,000 will have to be paid by the city for a special patrol car for the dog and its handler, who will be the only police officer to work with the dog.

Belgard estimates it will cost the city about \$4,000 a year to maintain the canine patrol.

City officials speculate the money will come from the city's general fund, but won't be sure until late this week.

Already, local residents have offered to contribute.

Bob Armstrong, who operates a firm that

sells equipment to law enforcement agencies, told council members his company would offer \$100 toward purchase of the dog.

Armstrong was one of about seven local residents who told the council they should approve more police officers in the city.

Among the speakers at last night's meeting who encouraged the council to fund all nine positions that Belgard requested were representatives from the local chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens and the Watsonville Parish Communities, a group made up of members of local churches.

With two more budgeted officers, Belgard's patrol will increase to 31. However, since it takes nearly a year to get an officer on the street, the city's patrol force will remain the same for some time, Belgard said.

In addition to the new police officers, the council approved expenditures of more than \$650,000 for capital improvement projects that have come up since the budget was approved last month.

Included in that list is repair of a sewer line and preparing a parcel as a dump site. Other expenses include \$100,000 to defend the city against a lawsuit that claims the city's method of electing council members is discriminatory, and \$150,000 for additional insurance and costs for employee overtime.

In other action, the council approved a rate hike for subscribers to Sonic Cable Television that will go into effect Aug. 1. The increase will bring the basic residential service charge for 19 channels to \$10.25. The charge is now \$8.95 a month.

The council also instituted a fortunetellers' permit fee. Henceforth, fortunetellers will be required to pay a \$150 a year business license fee.