

Watsonville finds funds for six additional officers

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Six more officers will be added to the Watsonville Police Department, and that made three City Councilmen pretty upset last night.

It's not that Rex Clark, Joe Marsano and Roy Ingersoll don't want more police on the streets — all the council members say they want more police.

Those three just don't think the city can afford hiring more officers by borrowing from its emergency reserves.

That's exactly how Mayor Ann Soldo proposes to do it, however, and she got the votes of council members Betty Murphy, Vido Deretich and Gwenn Carroll last night to try it, hoping that sales tax money will keep rolling in to feed the reserves for the future.

Clark called the plan to use reserves "a program for disaster for the city of Watsonville." Added Marsano, "You're betting on the come. I don't like that."

Sales tax is the heart of the city's general fund. The city has had a strict policy of putting half its annual collections into operations and half into a reserve account to bouy capital projects during years when sales tax revenues drop.

Those revenues have steadily increased in recent years, and several council members say its time to use some of that reserve to fund needed police officers, which is a recurring operational expense.

Clark, Marsano and Ingersoll say that instead it is time for the city to consider taxes on natural gas, electric and telephone utilites, as well as a number of rate increases for city services, to pay for police and other necessary programs the city needs more money for.

The rest of the council felt otherwise. They rejected the warnings of the city staff that tapping the reserves could jeopardize future budgets, and then

ordered \$180,000 transferred from two reserve funds in the city's 1986-87 budget to pay for the new officers.

That funding plan was one of 12 conceived by the mayor to get more police on the streets. The other proposals, which were not seriously considered, involved the layoff of four employees hired last year and a variety of departmental cuts in various travel and miscellaneous accounts.

Clark later presented his own funding plan, which included a 4-percent untility tax that would raise \$1 million a year, and also included a variety of rate increases on city services to help the city's sagging general fund. But by the time he'd done that, the mayor's funding scheme had already been approved.

The trio of dissenters was as miffed about that as they were with the funding plan itself, and had some harsh words for Soldo and her plan after the meeting.

They accused the mayor of grandstanding and of pushing the proposal through by not revealing it until last night and then calling for a vote to approve it.

But Soldo and the rest of the council say the complaints are much ado about nothing.

"We're not going to go bankrupt," the mayor said, pointing to a hefty sales tax reserve.

"This issue is as much personality conflicts as it is money," Councilman Deretich said.

"I don't see the doom that's forecast," Councilwoman Murphy said.

She even said the administrators who drew up the proposed budget had been too conservative in making their proposals.

"I'm a great one for tucking away the money," she said, "but when you come up with the need ... you can still be fiscally responsible, but you've just got to loosen up a little bit."

But City Manager John

Radin, who proposed the budget the council spent the last two weeks reviewing, said there's no more room to loosen the belt.

He said the city has a number of expenses that it has to have money on hand for, such as a \$500,000 self-insurance pool to cover the loss of liability insurance and the possible expenditure of \$600,000 in traffic signals throughout town.

"We've reached the end of our ropes as far as revenues are concerned," Radin said.

"I wish you'd stop saying we're in the red," Murphy said to Radin. "What you are saying is that we're not keeping up with the 50-50 (sales tax policy) deal."

She added, "The whole council thinks this (hiring more police) is a priority. There's just a difference in the approach to that priority."

Regardless, the council is scheduled to approve a \$63 million budget for the city Tuesday night, concluding two weeks of tedious study sessions on the 240-page document.

It now appears that the budget, which Radin called "bare bones," will include six more police officer salaries.

Actually, the city will be getting just four more since two of the positions were funded last year but were never filled. Radin proposed that the unfilled positions be eliminated to save money, but they were reinstated along with the four new ones.

Police Chief Ray Belgard was clearly pleased to finally get the funding he says he needs to better patrol city streets. But he was quick to point out that it doesn't mean more officers will be hired soon.

The city, like many others, has had trouble finding qualified applicants to become police officers. The process is slow and training is extensive.

"By January we'd be lucky to have four of those positions filled," he said. "I'd be surprised if we spent \$100,000 by (the end of the year)."