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Council seeks changes for police

By Douglas A. Moser

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Staff writer

Debate over what changes should be made at the Police Department began among city councilors this week, nearly 11 weeks after the full council avoided a potential lawsuit by approving a \$25,000 settlement with Patrolman Stephen Lamberis Jr.

Mayor John Bell said his administration has been working with police Chief John Beaudette to address issues surrounding the investigation and discipline of police officers. No changes at the Police Department have yet been made.

Beaudette put Lamberis on administrative leave Aug. 11, 2005, pending an investigation into three charges of misconduct. That investigation remains incomplete and "flawed," Bell said. City officials, including Bell and City Solicitor Linda Lowe, have admitted disciplining Lamberis on the evidence gathered would not have withstood a lawsuit.

On Jan. 21, Lamberis, the Police Department's only black employee, returned to work and later received the \$25,000 payment in return for an agreement to not file any lawsuits against the city pertaining to the disciplinary investigation, his health or his race.

Counting pay, the city's portion of health insurance and the \$25,000 settlement, the city paid more than \$135,000 to Lamberis during the 17 months he was on paid administrative leave.

"We've got to address this substantively and clearly in the light of day. That's what it boils down to for me," said at-large Councilor Bruce Tobey, chairman of the Ordinance and Administration Committee.

The committee took up the Lamberis issue Monday night after the Times filed a complaint with District Attorney Jonathan Blodgett saying the city violated the state Open Meeting Law regarding the content of the minutes from a secret session of a City Council meeting on Feb. 6, where councilors were briefed on Lamberis.

Thomas Donovan, special counsel in the district attorney's office, wrote to Council President James Destino on March 6, informing him of the complaint. Destino referred the matter to the city's lawyer, Lowe, and the full City Council. Tobey asked the council to refer it to the Ordinance and Administration Committee.

"It's less the executive session than it is the need to sort this out once and for all so there's no recurrence," Tobey said.

Tobey and Ward 4 Councilor Jackie Hardy voted against going into secret session that evening, maintaining the entire discussion should be public and open. They did not attend the closed meeting.

Hardy could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Councilors also began to discuss changes that should be made at the Police Department regarding investigations, discipline and administrative leave.

"Until (Monday) night, that matter was left solely to the administration," Tobey said. "My goal was to bring it back to the council."

Bell said yesterday that he will work with Beaudette to strengthen how the Police Department conducts investigations and how it communicates with officers being investigated and with the rest of city government.

"When personnel issues arise that could have an impact, whether in the Fire Department, in the city or the Police Department, having supervisors bring those situations to our attention immediately for immediate action is imperative," Bell said.

He cited several issues, including continuity through three police chiefs - former Chief James Marr, who retired in early 2003, interim Chief Michael McLeod, who served from 2003 until he retired at the end of 2004, and Beaudette - the completeness of the investigation and the hesitation to bring legal counsel and other city officials into the matter.

"We have to work on improving a system of collecting information that was flawed," Bell said. "There has to be an open dialogue with the employee so they know if their performance is substandard. And we have to get counsel involved earlier."

Some councilors said they should be involved as far as just being informed. Ward 3 Councilor John "Gus" Foote said the council should be informed on the mayor's decisions for change, but it should not micromanage a department that falls under the auspices of the mayor's office.

"The changes have to be made by the administration," said Foote, who sits on the committee with Tobey and at-large Councilor Sefatia Romeo. "If he informs the City Council, I don't think the council should sit down and say, 'I want this done, and I want that done.' I think the administration should do that."

Romeo said Monday night that the purpose of continuing the discussion is to avoid a recurrence of the 17-month episode, in which Lamberis was on paid leave with health benefits.

McLeod, an at-large city councilor, a former police chief and a candidate for mayor, did not return a phone message seeking comment.

The committee asked mayoral assistant Steven Magoon to update its members and the full council on Bell's progress in discussing and making changes in the Police Department.