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Chief: No cops for Fiesta; Mayor says 'no way' to Beaudette's threat

By Richard Gaines

Staff writer

The police chief warned the City Council in writing yesterday that impending cuts in his budget would mean no officers at the five-day St. Peter's Fiesta, which is held every June.

Chief John Beaudette calculated he could avoid spending \$26,000 by not assigning overtime for staff officers and part-time reserve officers.

But he did not indicate - and councilors did not ask - whether he meant to ignore this year's or next year's Fiesta. The budget debate is over spending for the fiscal year that begins July 1, which is the last day of the 2007 Fiesta.

Neither Beaudette nor police business manager Phil Terpos could be reached for comment.

But Mayor John Bell said he would not allow Beaudette to pull police from Fiesta coverage.

"No way, Jose, it will not happen," said Bell on learning at mid-afternoon of the chief's written plan for cutting 2 percent from his \$5.1 million budget.

After hearing Beaudette and his lieutenant, Joseph Aiello, on Tuesday, the committee cut the police budget by 2 percent. It began cutting other budgets on Tuesday and ended yesterday by eliminating three filled highway department laborers' positions during its review of the Department of Public Works.

Councilor Michael McLeod, who preceded Beaudette as chief on an interim basis, said he disagreed with Beaudette's response to a tighter budget and described him as posturing.

"He was just trying to make a point, but it's not the way to make a point," McLeod said after the committee recessed for the day.

As Beaudette left the morning session of Budget and Finance Committee, he told the Times he was "not sure" whether the cuts proposed by the committee would lead him to cancel Fiesta assignments as indicated in the memo he delivered to councilors at 9:30 a.m.

But Beaudette said eliminating Fiesta coverage, and his secondary ideas for saving money - eliminating beach patrols and meter maids - "keep manpower intact."

In his memo, he calculated he could save \$33,400 by pulling police patrols off the beaches and another \$86,765 by laying off the meter maids.

The memo was a response to a council directive last week to all department heads for written plans for reducing costs by 2 percent.

In a written analysis, Beaudette said the \$5.1 million he and Mayor Bell agreed the department needed "to meet normal operations" for the fiscal year that begins July 1 could not be cut without reducing "public safety services."

He and Lt. Aiello rejected suggestions by councilors that a better way to compensate for a lesser budget would be to eliminate overtime paid to officers for advanced training in forced entry to buildings, target practice and helping women achieve "rape awareness."

"I want to make it clear the council has not cut (Fiesta) police patrols," said Council President James Destino. "We left the choices to the chief of how to manage the dozens of overtime accounts he has."

Aiello raised the specter of a "Columbine" in Gloucester to justify the overtime accounts of \$35,000 for advanced firearms training and training in SWAT-like forced entry to schools to roust "classroom avengers."

Do you want to protect kids in the classroom, or do you want to go in a different direction?" he asked the councilors.

The committee's vice chairman, Jason Grow, answered by reminding Beaudette and Aiello that they already have nine officers trained for "Columbine situations. There's a pretty small likelihood of Columbine (a mass murder by two student gunmen at a Colorado high school in 1999) here and we can respond to it," said Grow.

The patrolmen's union in March accused Beaudette of retaliating against members of the force who questioned his "beloved" SWAT-like training exercises.

The committee answered Aiello's question by taking 2 percent from the police budget as it continued scouring departmental spending plans for monies that could be redistributed when the municipal budget is assembled and voted by the full council next Tuesday.

About \$78.6 million is available for municipal services and schools for the next fiscal year.

Destino told Beaudette how he met the cuts was at "his discretion," but he said he wondered whether it made more sense to eliminate training paid with overtime than cutting meter maids.

McLeod argued that the austerities facing the municipal departments were not shared by the School Committee.

"They should be looking at nonteaching positions," he said.

Leslie Sarofeen, who has monitored the budget hearings for One Gloucester, interjected that the school system is facing the loss of 44 teaching and nonteaching positions and the closing of the Fuller School should the council not find a way to add back to the school budget the \$1 million cut by Bell.

One Gloucester, which urged the funding restoration, is organizing for an override election this fall.

"The pain in this room is exactly what the School Department has been going through for four years," she said.

Grow wanted to cut the overtime training accounts in Beaudette's budget, but the committee chairman, Alphonse Swekla, and Destino outvoted him and made a general cut, leaving the decisions to the chief.

Swekla said he would be disappointed if Beaudette carried through on his warning to leave the Fiesta without police security.

"We need police patrols," said Swekla.

Bell said he was "surprised" that Beaudette would propose cutting coverage without consulting with him.

"It's much too important event to be denied security," he said.

The wrangling with Beaudette took place as the council pondered approving budgets that funded raises granted to police and firefighters.

The raises for superior officers, patrolmen and firefighters was negotiated by the Bell administration and inserted in the pending budget. The committee Tuesday sought a legal opinion from the city's lawyer, Linda Lowe, whether the council could refuse to fund the contracts.