

Richmond moves to bring in more police recruits amid growing manpower shortage, rising crime

By NED OLIVER Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Tuesday, November 22, 2016 10:15 pm

Richmond police officers on Tuesday described a department sinking into dire straits as the City Council considered a plan to fund a class of 20 new officers.

“We are hemorrhaging,” officer Gene Carter, who has worked in the department for seven years, told members of the council’s public safety committee.

“I have to let crime pass sometimes because it’s not prudent to interact with it because I don’t have (backup). My back is across the city. That is pitiful.”

Carter was one of dozens of officers, police officials and community members who spoke in favor of a proposal by Mayor Dwight C. Jones’ administration to piece together \$1.8 million to pay for the class of new recruits.

The council committee unanimously voted to advance the plan to the full council with a recommendation that it be approved, but some members raised questions about whether it would address the underlying problems the department is facing.

Councilman Parker C. Agelasto noted department officials have attributed the personnel shortage to poor pay and officers’ decision to leave for other departments.

“Back filling with more recruits isn’t the solution,” he said. “It’s the band aid to fill the gap.”

Councilman Charles Samuels concurred: “What I’m not hearing is what we are doing to stem this hemorrhaging.”

Richmond Police Chief Alfred Durham acknowledged the city’s pay scale and a five-year salary freeze has been an issue. “We’re working on that,” he said. “I’m going to have that.”

But he said the department is facing immediate issues: This year violent crime has risen 14 percent and the department’s response time for high priority calls has crept up from 4 minutes and 9 seconds last year to 4 minutes and 53 seconds this year.

“Response times should always trend down, not up,” Durham said.



Richmond Police Chief Alfred Durham

Richmond Police Chief Alfred Durham addressed the City Council’s public safety committee Tuesday as the department pushes for funding to bring in a new class of 20 recruits to address a manpower shortage.

Durham and other department officials said officers have been reduced to only answering 911 calls, leaving no time for proactive details and other measures they attribute to crime decreases seen in years past. He said officer morale is suffering.

The department, which has a sworn strength of 750 officers, currently only has 656 available.

The city already has taken steps to get its numbers back up: There are 36 recruits in the pipeline already, but Durham said he averages three resignations a month and has a high number of employees eligible for retirement, so it's unclear what the department's strength would be with the 20 new recruits.

The new recruit class would begin in mid January and could be working in the department as early as July.

Funding for the new recruits was not included in the city's budget, but administrators were able to find half of the money necessary to fund the measure through savings the city realized by renegotiating with its employee health care provider. The other half came from a payment made earlier this year by developers of Rocketts Landing in Henrico County to the city in exchange for providing utility service.

The full council is scheduled to take up the issue at a special meeting Monday.