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Out in Left Field, and Going Down?
San Francisco bucks the national trend to join private with public policing initiatives
by Ann Grogan, J.D.

San Francisco, the Left Coast city that likes to think of itself in the vanguard of national trends, is bucking one. While Oakland and other US cities are contracting and cooperating with private police and security companies, San Francisco's police commission is giving serious consideration to a research group's September 1 recommendation to abolish the city's privately-paid Patrol Special Police force. The hourly rates for this 162-year old City-Chartered force are paid by merchants, festival organizers and residents who value officers' responsive neighborhood policing on quality-of-life matters to which SFPD officers typically take one hour to respond. A fall, 2009 client survey conducted by a San Jose professor found that clients believe the Patrol Specials "are professional, non-disruptive, respond fast, and make my neighborhood a safer place to live and work."

Despite this evident support base, the police commission is fretting about an alleged \$300,000 cost principally to cover salaries for 1.5 high-level SFPD officers to administer the program, amounting to an average annual cost of \$10,000 per active Patrol Special Police Officer. The Police Chief can't possibly replace all 30 Patrol Specials with new SFPD officers because over two-thirds of the present SFPD officers earn an annual salary of \$100,000 or more per person and \$3 million is nowhere to be found in the city coffers, not to mention enormous future pension payouts after public police officers retire. Patrol Specials come with no such obligation to the taxpayer.

San Francisco expects to face yet another annual deficit next year in the amount of half a million dollars, and on October 6 the Police Chief told the commission to expect a reduction of his 1971 officers by 25% in five years. The Chief said he's already pulling officers out of district stations to police large sporting events such as the Giant's games downtown, leaving his fledgling community policing neighborhood initiatives in a lurch. Meantime the city seems to be running scared about a mysterious liability that might come about if they train the Patrol Special Police to even higher policing standards and abilities. The SFPD training officer recently refused to teach Patrol Specials how to safely handcuff and bring down a thug without injury to the perpetrator or the officers. Wouldn't the risk of liability rise more from the failure to train, than from this kind of training? Unless called in to back up their SFPD colleagues, Patrol Specials don't typically engage in high speed chases, shoot-outs, gangland policing, or serious law enforcement. They walk a neighborhood beat and intervene early in local disturbances to prevent them from becoming expensive crimes that SFPD officers need to address.

The police commission requires Patrol Specials to provide clients and neighborhoods where they patrol with a one million dollar liability policy and name the City as an additional insured. Considering Californian's litigious nature and huge jury verdicts these days, certainly a policy limit increase to \$5 or even \$10 million seems in order. But taking 30 officers off the streets rather than quickly putting another 30 or 300 on the streets backing up San Francisco's declining police forces seems more a short-sighted disservice to citizens and a sop to entrenched police union interests, than a credit to San Francisco's trail-blazing reputation.

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