

## CARE FIRST SOUTH PASADENA



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### **South Pasadena Coalition Seeks New Approach to Public Safety**

A coalition of more than 100 residents on Tuesday morning will ask the South Pasadena City Council to take a “care first” approach toward the community by reallocating some money now earmarked for policing to new social services and to reduce the overall police budget in the face of a historic financial crisis triggered by the pandemic.

“It is time for a new vision of public safety, one centered on health solutions and services provided in the community so that police intervention is the last option rather than the first and only response,” the residents—who have organized as Care First South Pasadena—will write to the City Council September 8.

“We support a Care First approach that reallocates resources from jails and law enforcement to programs that promote the health, safety and welfare of communities.”

The coalition also wants to make sure that all city departments share in helping the community steer through its budget shortfall.

“We are at a place, both locally and nationally, where it’s become obvious there is a better and more equitable way to achieve public safety and serve the community as a whole than what we have now,” said Matthew Barbato, a member of Care First South Pasadena. “The current system relies too much on over-policing and not enough on public services for the most vulnerable.”

Specifically, Care First South Pasadena is calling on the City Council to take four separate actions:

- First, roll back the rapid increase in the South Pasadena Police Department’s budget over the past two years by cutting current fiscal year police expenditures 15 percent and earmarking some of the funds to enhance now limited use of social workers to respond to the needs of the homeless, mentally ill, and others in need.
- Second, end a \$30,000 a year contract with the City of Pasadena for helicopter surveillance service, which subjects residents to noise and rattling windows each day with little demonstrated payoff in terms of enhancing public safety.

- Three, show why the Department, which has 10 officers on-call or on patrol at any time, needs 32 vehicles, including the maintenance and insurance cost associated with them, which is estimated at \$100,000 annually.
- Four, conduct an independent audit of the force to determine how operations can be optimized, how well policies are being followed, whether there is racial profiling in the community, whether there is systemic bias, and whether there are excessive uses of force, among other things.

The requests come after the city increased police salaries by 12 percent last fiscal year and then increased compensation by an additional 3.3 percent on top of that for the current fiscal year in the face of a projected \$3.4 million, or 11 percent revenue shortfall. An additional compensation boost of 2 percent is due on July 1, 2021, under an [agreement](#) (beginning on page 39) the City Council approved in 2019 right after it agreed to put a 0.75 percent sales tax hike on the ballot last November, which residents approved and was to net \$1.5 million in new revenue for all city programs and services.

The cumulative increase in police compensation under the agreement over a two-year period between July 1, 2019, and July 1, 2020, amounts to 18 percent under the agreement. The current national annual inflation rate is 1.6 percent, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Over the past two fiscal years, the Police Department's overall budget has grown by more than 14 percent, or almost \$1.2 million, consuming 80 percent of the new sales tax revenue, which likely has fallen short due to the pandemic downturn.

At the same time, the City Council cut other programs and [laid off more than 50 staff members](#) who provided a variety of community services to residents—including childcare, senior, and library services. Street repaving in the city, where some intersections and surfaces are like rubble, also has been scaled back and the city has failed for the past two years to produce routine financial reports, including a financial audit now more than 8 months overdue.

Now, under threat of layoffs, the city is moving to eliminate 10 more positions in its Finance Department, library, community services department, and administrative office.

"When residents ask the city to tackle issues important to the homeless and working poor, there's never enough money," said Aliza Rood, a coalition member. "Yet we increase the police budget without asking questions. This is backwards leadership, and it's time to flip the script and place our humanity front and center."

The police budget and compensation hikes come after the city refused to adopt rent control in a community where 35 percent of households pay 50 percent or more of their total income on housing and are considered to be under financial duress. The city refused to boost minimum wage too. Council members told residents pleading for assistance that the city couldn't afford to hire people to administer and enforce such programs.

Meanwhile, the recent pay boosts for police include elevating a captain to the role of deputy police chief and creating two new lieutenant positions. The memorandum of agreement between the city and the police union said that the "realignment at the management level of the Police Department is being proposed to provide for better allocation of resources within each division of the department and to provide for promotional opportunities." The city provided no details on how reclassifying the positions would "provide for better allocation of resources."

With the new raises, the city's Police Department will consume 35 percent of general fund revenue to sustain a force of 64 employees, including 36 sworn officers in a city that's considered relatively safe.

"It's just too expensive to support a police force of this size for a community with, thankfully, so little violent crime," said Barbato. "It is not financially responsible as a city with the budget issues and limited resources during covid to continue paying for a larger police force than is required."

[FBI data](#) show that if South Pasadena had the same number of officers as the average city its size along the Pacific Coast region of the U.S., it would have just 30 officers.

Crime rates in the city, according to [FBI data](#) are comparatively low in the area, with the rate below that of neighboring Pasadena, Alhambra, and other San Gabriel Valley cities. In addition, crime rates in the city itself have been relatively level in recent years, but despite that and the size of the force, only about 1 in 5 property crimes are successfully resolved and half or less of violent crimes are resolved, depending upon the year.

Also under the labor agreement, a new police officer recruit with a high school education who's completed a six-month police academy training program makes just about \$350 a month less than a civil engineer, who has completed a bachelor's degree. A police sergeant who's risen through the ranks commands a salary exceeding that of a deputy director of public works responsible for providing safe drinking water, safe streets for motorists, preventing sewer overflows, and designing and managing major capital projects, among other duties.