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Halifax takes aim at crime with new public safety office

By Our Staff

Halifax will soon have a public safety office to deal with crime prevention and reduction.

It will be staffed by 32 police officers and 14 civilians and volunteers and will have an annual budget of \$3.2 million, Chief Frank Beazley of Halifax Regional Police told councillors at city hall Tuesday.

The only new expenditure will be for a new superintendent — a public safety officer — at a cost of about \$100,000 annually.

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That bill would be picked up by the province, Justice Minister Cecil Clarke said Tuesday during the meeting at city hall.

Halifax has made major strides in reducing crime in the past few years, but the city has a way to go, Chief Beazley told reporters later.

Every year, he said, he establishes a "personal goal for crime reduction. But so far he hasn't reached one, he said.

Crimes of violence — "signal crimes, he called them — have "shocked the community in the past few years.

"So that's where our focus has been and we've been able to . . . drop those numbers considerably, Chief Beazley said.

It was the murder of American sailor Damon Crooks outside a downtown nightclub in 2006 that prompted Mayor Peter Kelly to create a roundtable on violence the following year.

A report on its findings, by Halifax criminologist Don Clairmont, came out in 2008. Councillors asked staff to rank and cost out the 64 recommendations, which were unveiled Tuesday.

Mr. Kelly said his top priority is finding a public safety officer.

"That will be done in the next few weeks, he said outside chambers.

Other programs that require extra funding, such as establishing a free "good night shuttle to take university students home from downtown, could be addressed if council wishes, he said.

"We have the buses, we have the staff, we have to find a way to put a mechanism in place to make it after-hours and it all comes down to money, Mr. Kelly said. Those discussions could be part of debates on council's 2009-10 budget.

Chief Beazley said he was able to keep the budget down by "reaching out and pulling in units that are already involved in crime prevention.

"People will become busier, he promised councillors during the meeting.

Other measures might include changing the taxi bylaw to increase the number of cabs downtown, reviewing the city's race relations committee and seeking Criminal Code amendments to target chronic offenders.

Chief Beazley said efforts will also be made to reduce binge drinking at the downtown's 260 establishments and to encourage university students to be good neighbours.

Last fall, more than 350 charges, from noise complaints to vandalism, were laid against students in the city's south end. As well, 3,800 people were charged with public intoxication in 2008.

The effort to boil down the recommendations into a focused plan was greeted with two responses not often seen at council: a lengthy standing ovation and a unanimous vote.

During the 2½-hour session, each of the 21 councillors present stood to congratulate Mr. Clarke and Mr. Beazley and pass along their own recommendations to make the city safer.

"We've come a long way, said Coun. Barry Dalrymple (Fall River-Waverley-Beaver Bank).

The recently elected councillor, an RCMP officer for 25 years, said Chief Beazley and his RCMP counterpart, Supt. Darrell Beaton, understand where to allocate resources.

"We're in very good hands, he said.

Many of the councillors touched on the importance of child care and youth programming as preventive measures.

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