

Province asked again to step in on Victoria police hiring

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Victoria Police Chief Del Manak.
Photograph By DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST

For the second straight year, the Victoria and Esquimalt police board is asking the B.C. government to override city council and approve the hiring of additional officers.

Victoria Police Chief Del Manak said Friday that the police board has asked the province's police services division to authorize four positions that were turned down by council this year.

The positions include a civilian research analyst, a cyber crimes investigator and two officers assigned as a pilot project to the integrated teams that help people with mental-health problems.

Esquimalt council supported two of the four positions during budget discussions this year, but Victoria council declined to pay for any of them.

Manak believes the board has a good case for getting those decisions overturned. "The police board and the department feel strongly that those are required resources for our community to provide safety," he said.

The chief pointed to an independent University of Victoria study this year that concluded the police officers on the integrated mental-health teams contribute to more positive outcomes for people.

Manak believes the officers are so important that he's borrowed resources from elsewhere in the department to keep the teams intact until the director of police services renders a decision.

He said there's also significant evidence of the need for a cyber crime investigator to deal with the proliferation of online bullying, stalking, fraud and other illegal activity. "It's all technological-based crime and the Victoria police department has limited capacity to deal with it."

The Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General confirmed Friday that the director of police services has received an application from the police board requesting a review related to the 2019 budget. A ministry official was unable to say how long that review might take.

The police board won a similar case in February, when the acting director of police services ordered Victoria and Esquimalt to hire six officers that were denied Manak's department in 2018.

The ongoing tension between the police and Victoria council stems in part from the costs associated with trying to police the region's downtown core with little to no help from suburban municipalities -- except for Esquimalt.

Unlike most metropolitan areas in Canada that are policed by a single regional force, Greater Victoria has four municipal departments and three RCMP detachments policing about 370,000 people.

Coun. Ben Isitt called again Friday for the provincial government to intervene and resolve the “funding quagmire” that sees Victoria and Esquimalt taxpayers foot the bill for policing the core area.

“Each year’s budgeting process, we essentially find ourselves in a fiscal crisis, where council is extremely reluctant or even unwilling to grant the requests that VicPD says is necessary for public safety,” he said.

“So I think rather than have this as an eternal discussion between the council and the municipality and the police and the police board, bring the province into the conversation since ultimately policing is a provincial responsibility.”

Isitt made the comments as Manak appeared before Victoria councillors to request a 4.43 per cent budget lift for 2020. If approved, the police operating budget would increase by about \$2.5 million to \$58.2 million.

Police officials told councillors that the increase is needed, in part, to cover pay raises, the cost of the six officers ordered by the province and a new pilot project to hire four unarmed special constables in an effort to ease the workload on sworn officers.

Manak said in an interview that he still hopes to restore the three school liaison officers that were cut in 2018, but the department continues to struggle with severe staff shortages.

Although the department has an authorized strength of 249 officers, it’s currently down about 35 officers due to physical and occupational stress injuries, family leaves and new recruits training at the police academy.

Manak said that before he can reinstate the school-liaison positions, he has to make sure his front line has enough people to respond to emergencies. “So it keeps getting delayed longer than I would have liked.”

The Victoria police department received a 3.2 per cent increase to its nearly \$54-million budget in 2019, but was still forced to eliminate front-desk-service hours on evenings and weekends, and disband a nine-member crime-reduction unit so that officers could better answer 911 calls.

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