

Esquimalt twice snubs funding for new police officers; services might be cut

Service cuts could be in the offing as Esquimalt has for the second time turned down additional funding to hire six new police officers, says Victoria Police Chief Del Manak.

“One of the options is to reduce service levels in other non-critical areas to bolster our front lines,” said Manak, adding that could include police staffing at community events.

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“I’ve got to consider all my options to make sure that if people are calling 911, the Victoria Police Department is adequately responding within a reasonable period of time.”

Manak said he will outline options to the police board in coming weeks.

Esquimalt council has voted 4-3 against spending \$40,778 to fund its share of hiring six additional officers.

The decision means the six new officers will not be hired at this point.

Council rejected the same request in January. The police department presented a revised case to councillors on Monday night.

Esquimalt is responsible for about 15 per cent of the police budget, while Victoria covers the balance.

A number of factors played into the decision, said Esquimalt Mayor Barb Desjardins, but the proposed budget increase just “didn’t compute” for the majority of her council.

Quarterly police statistics regularly have shown reductions in calls and crime rates, she said.

“This is not about not having good service,” Desjardins said. “It’s about everything that we’ve seen doesn’t justify the need for an increase in officers.”

The amount being sought from Esquimalt represents about 80 per cent of the cost of one officer for this year.

Esquimalt councillors were told that of the proposed six officers, four would be deployed on patrol in Victoria and two on a new Alternate Response Unit.

“I was disappointed they didn’t frame it in a way that Esquimalt council could say: ‘Yes, there is the designation of one officer specific to Esquimalt doing these duties,’ ” Desjardins said. “That way there would be ownership and direct benefit to Esquimalt. But it wasn’t portrayed that way.”

Manak said Esquimalt wasn’t being asked to fund the four officers to be assigned to Victoria patrol.

“Esquimalt wasn’t asked to pay for those resources,” he said. “What they were asked to pay for is a portion of the two officers that are working in a new unit called the Alternate Response Unit.”

Officers assigned to the new unit, based in Victoria, would respond to calls in both municipalities.

Duties would include telephone response and investigative support for on-street officers.

“It’s an alternate response,” Manak said. “It’s a new way of thinking and providing greater efficiencies.”

Existing resources are increasingly stretched, he said, a situation exacerbated by the seriousness of the offences and increasingly complex policing standards. “Many of the offences that are occurring in Esquimalt are of a more serious nature ... therefore, they require more resources,” Manak said.

VicPD, which has about 240 sworn officers, hasn’t had any increase in its ranks since 2010.

Manak said an independent review released in 2017 on front-line policing resources clearly stated the police department needs to bolster resources to meet demands.

Victoria councillors approved the city’s share of the funding for the new hires.

Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps, who co-chairs the police board with Desjardins, said she expects Manak will have to redeploy resources from other areas in order to ensure the patrol division is adequately staffed.

“We’ll all have to live with the fact that the chief will be making some pretty hard recommendations and we’re going to have to live with those for this year,” Helps said.

She said the next step is to go to the province’s director of police services for a determination of whether the officers are needed to provide adequate and effective policing under the Police Act.

Victoria would not consider funding the additional officers on its own, Helps said.

“We’re not going to do that. This is an amalgamated police department and if we hope to have wider amalgamation of municipal police departments in the region — which I do hope — I think we need to get this sorted out from a process point of view,” she said.

“Let the director of police services make a ruling and then we’ll all be clear going forward about what happens not just with Esquimalt and Victoria but if Saanich and Victoria and Esquimalt join together.”

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