

A Vision for Boston: Questions for the 2009 Mayoral Candidates

DAY 10: PUBLIC SAFETY

Is Boston safer than it was four years ago? How will you maintain neighborhood policing in Boston in a tight fiscal environment?

With a fiscal 2010 budget of \$278.2 million and 2,983 employees, the Boston Police Department (BPD) is the city's second largest department. Neighborhood policing is its stated mission. District police officers work with residents, community and faith-based leaders, and other local and federal law enforcement agencies to address crime and the fear of crime in Boston.

A comparison of statistics from 2004 through 2008 indicates an overall decline in most categories of crime in the City. Violent crime was down 4% and property crime down 19%. Homicides increased by one case, or 2%, over four years, but decreased by 15% in the past three. Rape decreased by 21%, aggravated assault by 5%, burglary by 24% and vehicle theft by 57%. Conversely, drug arrests did increase by 46%. Preliminary 2009 data through mid-August indicates a continued overall downward trend, except for rape and vehicle thefts, which have increased.

The foundation for police officer deployment in the 11 districts is the beat plan, by which officers in cruisers are responsible for identifying and working to address problem areas while simultaneously providing rapid response to 911 calls. The plan is augmented by special service units such as the detective, homicide, drug control and gang units. In addition, neighborhood business districts are covered by walking beats. In high crime areas, officers in Safe Street Teams are assigned to walking beats in an effort to provide visibility and engage with the community.

Neighborhood policing is labor intensive. As of August 2009, the number of sworn officers in BPD totaled 2,191. This represents an increase of 199 officers since January 2004. However, the total has declined slightly this year and is expected to continue to decline through attrition as the BPD budget does not provide for a fall class at the Academy. Further, officers who are pension eligible and receive Quinn Bill benefits may decide to retire before the reductions in Quinn Bill payments kick in next year.

The BPD is facing tight fiscal times. Its budget increased by just over 1% last year and decreased by 2.4% this year, due primarily to the reduction in state Quinn Bill payments. Officer layoffs were avoided only with the help of federal stimulus funds. The staffing requirements for neighborhood policing have been achieved, in part, by greater use of overtime, which has contributed to total police overtime spending being more than double what was budgeted in recent years.

Do you believe Boston is safer now than it was four years ago? Are you committed to the neighborhood policing program and if so, with finances tight, how will you ensure the level of sworn officers needed to maintain it? Would you suggest any changes to the current strategy?

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