

Sheriff seeks funds for citizens' patrol

Phalen confident commissioners will approve \$100K cost

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LANCASTER - Fairfield County Sheriff Dave Phalen wants to partner with the Fairfield County Board of Commissioners to create a deputy position to provide better security for the county's courthouse and neighborhoods.

But it's going to cost the commissioners \$100,000.

▼ ADVERTISEMENT ▼ "What's unique about doing it in Fairfield County is that we're going to use a component that is going to add an additional person to our Hall of Justice after hours," said Judy Shupe, county commissioner. "Our Hall of Justice doesn't necessarily close down at four o'clock, but our security guard goes (home)."

The plan calls for a new law enforcement position that would require a deputy to begin his or her workday at 4 p.m. in the Fairfield County Hall of Justice. The deputy would provide courthouse security after the daily security guard leaves, until all regular business has concluded. The deputy would then supervise teams of neighborhood volunteer patrolmen under a Citizens on Patrol unit.

Phalen said he would need at least \$50,000 as soon as possible to get the program underway for recruitment, training and equipment, such as clothing, communications gear and a cruiser. The remaining \$50,000 would maintain the program.

"It would begin as soon as I had indication from the commissioners they were going to fund the program," Phalen said. "This is something we could have a lot of citizen involvement (in). In Arizona, Pinal County did this program and cut crime by more than 50 percent."

Deputies in Pinal County, Ariz. found themselves with a lack of manpower when a seven-year, 51-percent population boom began to overwhelm the area. That's when Pinal County Sheriff Chris Vasquez recruited more than 30 civilian deputy volunteers.

"The only real obstacle I found was getting citizens interested in the program," Vasquez said. "I pitched the program for over a year. Finally, I had two block-watch captains perk up and show an interest, and it took off from there."

Similar sprawling suburban communities such as North Miami Beach, Fla., and Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., have successful volunteer patrols. At least 30 people have shown interest in the Fairfield County program, which would take six to eight weeks to implement, pending the commissioners' approval, Phalen said.

He is confident he will get the funding, despite budget cuts three years ago that forced him to let go of 26 employees. Five positions were filled since the cuts. Phalen currently has about 85 deputies, including corrections officers and supervisors, who work within his \$8 million budget.

Commissioner Mike Kiger approves of the program, but wants to make sure no other county entity is left behind since the end of the fiscal year is one month away, and the county's annual budget retreat is four months away.

"It's a very good program," Kiger said. "But my concern is that if we give him \$100,000, there may be some other programs that we won't be able to look at. I just think we need to be aware of that."

In Pinal County, Vasquez is using an old patrol vehicle. The gas and other related equipment costs come from an existing budget line item. Community organizations chipped in and donated a GPS system and shirts for volunteers, meaning much lower expenses were taken from Vasquez's \$23 million budget.

"The cost to implement the program was not that much," Vasquez said. "Less than \$1,000 for additional decaling of the vehicle."

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