

San Francisco struggles to keep enough cops on its streets

By **SF Crime Examiner**, Thomas Pendergast
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Now that the "Baby Boomer" generation is retiring, the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) once again finds itself in violation of the City Charter, while it struggles to keep pace with voter-mandated staff levels.



Outside the Thomas J. Cahill Hall of Justice, San Francisco

Story and photo by Thomas K. Pendergast

About a third of the SFPD is set to start collecting pensions in the next few years and if the funding, training and hiring of new recruits don't replace them soon, the City could again find itself chronically short of cops.

In 1994, San Francisco voters mandated an amendment in the Charter requiring the SFPD to provide a minimum of 1,971 "full-duty sworn officers," yet the city is now about 50 such officers below that minimum level and thus is in violation of the Charter. This has been an ongoing problem for the SFPD and only sporadically has the department been in compliance with the Charter.

According to Alice Villagomez, the human resources director at the SFPD, as of Dec. 11th, the force is officially at 1,916 "full duty sworn staff" but might be as much as 100 officers below the minimum requirement because the official count includes officers who right now are temporarily either on leave or non-full-duty status.

The number 1,971 goes back to former Mayor Dianne Feinstein, who collaborated with SFPD brass to arrive at an amount that the City could afford in 1979. The number was decided

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upon before the full effects of Proposition 13 hit municipal budgets, or the ailing economies that have come and gone since then.

In 2004, voters passed Proposition C, which directed the department to replace officers at desk jobs and to fill them with civilians for less money. The plan was to put those officers on patrol assignments.

"(The SFPD) did in fact reach 1,971 full-duty sworn officers a year ago," said Inspector Gary Delagnes, president of the SF Police Officer's Association (POA). "Over the next five to six years, potentially 650 people will be retiring and there's absolutely no way that (the City) is going to replace them. We're going to have to tighten our belts. It's difficult for everyone so everyone has to share the pain. I just hope they don't have to start letting people off. We're two or three years away from digging our way out of this thing."

Compounding the problem, across the state and country, one of the few service industries with lots of job opportunities is law enforcement. Competition between police departments has intensified, as they recruit from other cities and military bases, while offering enticing bonuses and other benefits to join. San Francisco offers to chip in \$20,000 for a down payment on a police officer's house within the city but "in reality, \$20,000

doesn't go far in this town but it's a start," said Delagnes.

At the same time, officers are being asked for more intelligence gathering and counter-terrorism responsibilities since 9/11; there are also "emerging" crimes, like cyber-crimes and human trafficking, which absorb a lot of time and resources to investigate.

Two years ago, San Francisco police received a pay raise of about 25 percent, making them competitive with other top-paying departments in the Bay Area.

Since then, according to an email sent by Villagomez, '186 officers retired, 116 have resigned, and 50 have been released.'

Meanwhile 368 candidates entered the police academy, 245 successfully completed it and of these, 38 were hired by other law enforcement agencies, according to the email. Villagomez also noted that 'no funding was provided in the department's current 2009-2010 budget to pay for new academy classes. Notwithstanding, the department received a Federal COPS Hiring grant to pay for 50 new officer positions for a three-year period. An Academy class of 42 began in October and additional lateral hires will start later in the fiscal year.'

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'There have been 38 full-duty sworn positions replaced by civilians since 2007 and overall there have been 91 sworn positions civilianized since 2004. Due to ongoing fiscal challenges and budgetary constraints, many of the newly budgeted or proposed positions were deleted and or defunded from the department's budget,' Villagomez concluded in the email.

"It's an unfunded mandate from citizens onto the taxpayers," said Edwards. "Voters passed a referendum mandating this burden onto taxpayers. ... It seems like direct democracy that's gone out of control. It's like you imposed something on your neighbor without going through the filter of the legislature. It was a citizens' referendum that imposed what they wanted onto the taxpayers."

Looking back to 1994, when San Francisco voters mandated the Charter amendment requiring a certain level of "full-duty sworn" police officers, it was perhaps not unlike the concept of an 'unfunded mandate.' The classic definition of an unfunded mandate is when one level of government imposes requirements on another level of government, while providing no money to make them happen. Also, it's when the government imposes regulations on businesses while offering no financial incentives or assistance. So admittedly, it might be stretching this definition just a bit to include that 1994 amendment.

[Go here for the Richmond Review article from Aug. 2007; a similar article on police staffing issues --->>>](#)



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Chris Edwards, director of tax policy at the CATO Institute, agreed that a very loose definition of 'unfunded mandate' might include this vote, though he had a more precise description of what he concludes the San Francisco electorate did in 1994.

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