

Boston residents call for slashing police budget

By **Danny McDonald** and **Milton J. Valencia** Globe Staff, Updated June 9, 2020, 9:00 p.m.



Mayor Martin J. Walsh indicated he is receptive to reallocating parts of the city's police budget. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

For more than four hours Tuesday, a diverse array of Boston residents called on the city to redirect police funding toward job training, wellness programs, mental health treatment, and other community resources, as appeals for reexamining the role of the police, both locally and nationwide, continued.

At a City Council public comment session, residents from Jamaica Plain and Dorchester, white, Black, Asian and Latinx, academics and young activists, were among those calling for substantial changes to the city's police budget. Several put forward a demand: The council should trim 10 percent of the police budget, particularly from overtime spending.

Mayor Martin J. Walsh's administration, which says it is facing a \$60 million gap in the overall city budget due to the COVID-19 pandemic, is set to submit a modified spending proposal to the council in the coming days. Councilor Kenzie Bok, chairwoman of the council's ways and means committee, said councilors have received more than 5,500 e-mails from residents calling for an overhaul of spending priorities.

The wide calls for police reform from people in Boston, including tens of thousands who have marched in protests in recent days, come as city councilors are pushing for information about the militarization of police, the role of police in schools, and use-of-force policies. Those issues are slated to be discussed at Wednesday's council meeting.

Walsh, in a statement on Tuesday, called for "meaningful" changes in the wake of widespread anger and sadness over the killing of George Floyd.

Over the weekend, [Walsh indicated he is receptive to reallocating parts of the police budget](#), but he has yet to detail

what that would look like. In his Tuesday statement, the mayor said his administration this year had “originally proposed a level funded budget for Boston Police for the upcoming year, while at the same time directing an \$80 million increase for schools and a \$16 million increase for housing.”

At Tuesday’s council hearing, Fatema Ahmad, of the Muslim Justice League, said the council should reject claims that police use resources for community outreach efforts.

“Community policing is really just a slick way of policing,” she said.

Ahmad, who was among the more than 60 people who testified remotely at the virtual meeting, recognized that the city faces budget cuts, but said councilors should put police resources on the chopping block first.

“Sixty million in overtime doesn’t look like scarcity to me, it seems like a good place to start,” she said.

The advocacy for reducing the police budget comes amid demonstrations throughout the United States protesting police brutality and systemic racism.

At Tuesday’s meeting, Vikiana Petit-Homme, of Hyde Park, said, “When we’re talking about how that cut would look like, that means capping overtime, that means not spending money on military exercises that only continue to militarize police.”

“When we give people that much power, corruption happens, so we really have to give that power back to the people, back to communities,” she said.

Proposals ranged from funding more jobs for city youth, more job training, to more public health programs that could

close the life expectancy gaps between Boston's richest and poorest communities. Several residents also called for more housing support, and for the city to spend more on educational programming.

Lauren Chambers, who analyzed the police budget for the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, said the department's \$414 million budget is four times larger than the budget of the Boston Public Health Commission.

Of that spending, \$60 million has gone to police overtime, allowing some police officers to cash in, she said. More than 500 police officers made more than \$200,000 last year, including more than 20 who made more than \$300,000, according to a Globe review of city spending.

Several residents gave personal accounts of their interactions with police, as well. Alex Ponte-Capellan, a community organizer with the grass-roots Young Abolitionists organization, recalled being followed by a police officer several years ago and frisked — the same day he took ACLU training on civil rights.

“At that moment I realized, though I knew what the laws say, it only matters in that moment who has the power, and in that moment I knew I didn't have the power,” he said. “It lit a fire in me.”

Jarrold Johnson, of Dorchester, said that community policing efforts have meant nothing when neighborhoods remain unsafe.

“It's not enough to give a kid a bike . . . when they don't have a safe place to ride a bike,” he said. It's not enough to fund police officers in schools when “we have unsafe buildings,” Johnson said.

Some of the sentiments echoed something police themselves have long maintained: The police cannot fix all of society's problems, from mental health crises to homelessness to students misbehaving in school.

“Dependency on police is not equivalent to community health,” Michael A. Davis, Northeastern University's chief of

police, said Monday. “Communities thrive when they’re interdependent. . . . [This is] such an important moment. And it may be the moment of our generation. We need to take advantage of it.”

Some current and former Boston police leaders say that efforts to reduce funding for law enforcement in the city could lead to layoffs and thwart community policing that helps build trust between residents and police.

Calls for reevaluation of police spending come as city councilors are looking to probe several aspects of local law enforcement.

City Councilor Michelle Wu, for instance, is asking for information on how much military-style equipment belongs to the police department, as well as documents detailing how police responded to recent demonstrations.

Wu said recently that studies “are very clear, militarized police departments kill more civilians,” adding that it is important to understand what has happened in recent days.

During a conference call Tuesday, Wu’s fellow city councilor, Ricardo Arroyo said, “What’s undeniable is that police do not cure the root causes of crime or poverty or any of the issues that lead to the issues that we then police.”

Arroyo thought funding could be taken out of the police overtime budget, and he said he would like to see more money funneled toward initiatives that provide more substance abuse beds locally or more educational and housing opportunities in the city.

On Wednesday’s city council meeting agenda, there are orders calling for hearings to take a look at the roles of Boston School Police Officers and campus police in the city, as well as a proposal calling for a discussion of Boston police’s use-of-force policy.

Walsh, in his statement, said that the City Council has unanimously passed the police budget the past two years, and that he has reached out to City Council President Kim Janey “several times over the past few days to see if we can sit down together on this.”

“Unfortunately, that has not been able to happen yet,” said Walsh. “Regardless, I am committed to making real change and making Boston a national leader in building a more just future, and I expect to have more information to share later this week.”

Messages left with Janey on Tuesday were not returned.

Gal Tziperman Lotan and Matt Rocheleau of the Globe staff contributed to this report.

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