

LOMPOC POLICE DEPARTMENT

Moving Toward a Safe and Proud Community

SUMMARY

Citizens of Lompoc (City) have rated public safety as their number one concern in surveys and community forums. There has been good reason for that. The Lompoc Police Department has struggled to answer calls at a time when the City has seen an “unrelenting upward trend in violent crime,” as stated in the City’s 2021-22 budget. Citizens felt their Police Department was not protecting them. In fact, the Sheriff’s Office at times filled gaps in service during high crime periods. The 2021 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury investigated how the shortfalls in City finances impacted the Lompoc Police Department and how remediation is being implemented.

The budgetary limitations have greatly handicapped the police force. Over the last six years, it has lost a third of its officers, and equipment failures have hindered immediate response. The Police Department has been underfunded for over half a decade, and there were concerns that the City balanced the budget at the cost of public safety.

A change in local political attitudes took shape in 2018. The City Council wanted to restore the Police Department to its former strength as part of a movement to get out of the financial doldrums it had fallen into. Not only was there political will to help the police force, but there was motivation to provide the means to do so with a sales tax initiative in 2020 and new cannabis taxes in 2021. The American Rescue Plan Act also brought a source of new money to help with the revenue losses during the COVID-19 years. The City Council and the Police Department are working together now toward recovery from the issues that have faced the City. Both are looking forward to a safer and prouder future.

The 2021 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury commends the Lompoc City Council, City, and Police administrations for their concerted efforts to fund and rebuild the Lompoc Police Department, recognizing that a safe environment and future growth of the City depend upon the excellence of law enforcement.

INTRODUCTION

Lompoc’s population has remained steady over the last 10 years, but not because it has meant to keep the populace around 42,000. It has not been able to grow. About 13,500 people drive out of town for work every day. The City’s budget started to shrink to the point that in 2020 the City had almost zero financial reserves.

The budget of the Lompoc Police Department (LPD) was hit hard by the downward trend in funding. It went from \$23 million for 2015-2017 to \$11 million for 2021. The number of police officers fell from 51 to 31. One by one, the special units were disbanded as the officers had to cover regular patrol. Some officers even had to fill in for dispatch. Sometimes dispatch has called the Sheriff’s deputies because the LPD was so short-staffed. In its budget presentation to City Council, the LPD sadly named as one of its accomplishments, “For the fourth consecutive year, we remained within the Council authorized budget, despite extensive staffing shortages and additional costs due to COVID-19 PPE requirements.” Radio equipment became so old that there were no replacement parts. Vehicles were in the shop as often as not. There was little left to trim in the Department’s budget.

The LPD was handicapped at a time when crime was not only increasing but also becoming more violent. Over the past 10 years, Lompoc has experienced more car thefts, gang incidents, and multiple shootings every year. By October 2021, there were four murders, equaling the four in 2020 but down from the seven murders in 2019. In 2020 the police dealt with 753 assaults, of which 183 were aggravated. The first half of 2021 experienced a 50 percent increase in shootings over the same period in 2020. By October 2021, there had been over 60 shootings. LPD reports that 90 percent of the shootings were gang related. Twenty-five juvenile gang members were arrested and released by the juvenile hall. These fearful statistics reflect the greater availability and use of firearms. Gang members used to fight with bats and sticks; now they use guns. The LPD reports 90-100 gang incidents each year nowadays. There are three major gangs in the city – ten overall – with up to 600 gang members or associates of all ages, and gang members from nearby cities often migrate in.

In the last three years, a change in leadership on the City Council and in City Hall brought a new resolve to remedy the City’s finances. After years of discouragement, the City Council proposed a tax measure to raise the sales tax by one percent over the next 15 years. Although the primary reason was to pay the debt to its pension fund, the City promoted the new tax rate as a deterrent to cutting additional police and fire services, street repairs, and park upkeep. City residents responded by passing the tax measure by almost 70 percent in 2020. The next year, residents approved a new tax schedule on cannabis manufacturers and distributors in the city limits by an even higher 77 percent.

When the American Rescue Plan Act announced at the beginning of 2021 that Lompoc qualified for \$13.19 million in community improvement funds, the City Council conducted a public survey concerning spending preferences. About 800 people responded, with a fully staffed and equipped police force being among the highest priorities. The Lompoc community reinforced the political will to bring the LPD back to a fully staffed and equipped public safety department.

METHODOLOGY

The 2021 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury conducted its investigation of the Lompoc Police Department by interviewing a spectrum of police officers and staff members. The Jury also interviewed a Lompoc City administrator and a City Council member, followed budget hearings, and read published documents from City Hall. For a broader perspective, the Jury interviewed a member of the Board of Supervisors and a Deputy in the Sheriff’s Office. A good number of local newspaper articles and opinion pieces were read. Lastly, members researched police and crime information online.

OBSERVATIONS

Police Officers

The number of officers in the Lompoc Police Department has been reduced because of budget cuts over the last decade, which created a number of unfilled vacancies. The remaining officers have had to work longer hours with few breaks. It was reported that 30 officers were doing the work of 50 or 60. While the necessitated overtime has brought higher income for the officers, they were drained of energy.

Over the last few years, LPD has lost 24 officers to the Santa Maria Police Department, where police officers work fewer hours for more pay. In fact, it lost half of the 32 officers and dispatchers hired in the last five years. Lompoc’s salary and benefit package, at 20-30 percent

lower than other police departments in the region, was not competitive to keep or recruit officers. As the LPD loses trained and experienced officers, it must fill the ranks with “rookies,” who are unable to work independently and must partner with an experienced officer for at least the first year. There are currently two new hires in field training. In addition, the new officers need time to become familiar with residents and neighborhoods. LPD considers hiring and training new officers a two-year process.

The reduced police force has also had a lack of upward mobility. There were few steps up the career ladder after the rank of Sergeant. This contributed to the high turnover in the force. Top management commends those officers who stay in the force, saying they are from Lompoc, know the neighborhoods, and love the City.

Improvements have been made in the past year. As of November 2021, there are 45 LPD Officers, of which 35 are deployable; the Department is budgeted for 47.¹ The LPD has begun to recruit new officers before they enter the Police Academy. The LPD has acquired three trainees this way in the past year. Moreover, the Department created a Lieutenant position, giving one more step up the career ladder and a more viable succession plan.

In 2020, the City made a one-year agreement with the LPD for a retroactive two percent salary increase and augmented medical contributions. After the one-year agreement expired, the Lompoc City Council voted for a permanent three percent salary increase effective in July 2021. While improved, the salary and benefit package is still behind the other police departments within Santa Barbara County and the region. The Jury learned that the current disparity between compensation (salary and benefits) for officers in Lompoc compared to other regional cities ranges from \$8,000 to \$30,000 a year, and represents an 8 percent to 28 percent difference.

Being short-staffed, LPD has called out to other partnering agencies in order to maintain safety standards. Surrounding city police departments, and in particular the Sheriff’s Office, assist with crime sweeps and in times of crisis for an enhanced level of law enforcement presence. A contract with the Santa Barbara County Sheriff’s Office has, in fact, been considered over the years. It has been suggested that a limited contract could address targeted needs on a priority basis during an interim period while the LPD builds up its experienced police force.

Specialized Units

High on the list of priorities within the LPD is the restoration of specialized units. These units engage more in proactive police work rather than reactive. For example, they improve relations in the community, they provide a dampening effect for some violations, or they get to know a neighborhood and gather intelligence. Working in concert with the community, these specialized units have been successful in reducing crime. As it is now, the Department depends on the community to provide information. Unfortunately, as budgets were cut and officer numbers reduced, the specialized units were suspended and their officers put back on patrol. However, with additional 2021 budget funding, one unit has been reinstated and others will continue to be added as funds and staff become available.

The first specialized unit to disband due to budgeting limitations was the Gangs Narcotics Enforcement Team in 2015. It was comprised of five officers and a supervisor. The aforementioned statistics (100 gang-related calls per year, 60 shootings in the first 10 months of 2021) demonstrate the need for an insider unit in Lompoc. Gang arrests are

¹ The 10 officers not deployed are those in training, on temporary disability, or administrative leave.

particularly complex because many of the crimes are committed by youths. Of the 25 arrested and released juvenile gang members mentioned above, 11 were rearrested. Currently, only the more serious felonies lead to full incarceration.

School Resource Officers (SRO) are one way to stay on top of knowledge about gang activities. Between 2005 and 2016 there was one officer at the high school and another at the middle school. The middle school SRO was eliminated in 2016 because of budget constraints, and the high school SRO left because of COVID in 2019.

The Traffic Unit was also dissolved because of staffing limitations, and the two full-time traffic officers and Sergeant were moved to patrol. While patrol officers support traffic enforcement now, having designated traffic officers in the field can proactively discourage reckless driving. A traffic unit can also provide DUI enforcement, take care of traffic violations, and increase awareness for traffic safety for vehicles, bicycles, and pedestrians. Furthermore, traffic stops can uncover criminals and illegal firearms.

LPD also lost its Community Outreach team. There had been two officers and one Sergeant, going back to the 1970s. Community Outreach held neighborhood meetings, where they found volunteers for over 3,000 hours of service (until the pandemic); oversaw programs such as Police Activities League, Junior Giants, and the Explorers; formed Neighborhood Watch groups; and, held community events. This team was disbanded in 2019.

Similarly, a liaison officer for the homeless was pulled from that specialty position and put on patrol. The homeless encampment in the Santa Ynez Riverbed is a source of constant problems, crime being only one of them. Public safety and environmental health were enough of a concern that a major cleanup was scheduled in 2018 with the aid of the County, and a second was requested in 2020 along with two patrol officers. The second cleanup did not occur.

One new team that has become necessary is a Cannabis Compliance Team. The Jury learned that only one officer was available for the first inspections, and not one operation was in compliance. With many cannabis applications waiting to be approved, the City has a need to form a multi-member team with the Police Department to enforce compliance.

LPD has no in-house crisis management team to deal with mental health issues. However, 15 sworn officers and two dispatchers have received Crisis Intervention Training. In addition, the Santa Barbara County Behavioral Science Unit created a Co-Response program with the Sheriff's Office; there is currently only one team for the entire North County. Each team consists of one deputy from the Sheriff's trained Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) and one mental health clinician or case worker from the County's Behavioral Wellness Department. The Jury was repeatedly informed that teams have frequently been slow to respond because of the large distances to cover. Without the ability to write 5150 Welfare and Institutions holds, LPD has its hands tied when dealing with those who are experiencing a mental health crisis. It is widely accepted that LPD is deficient in resources to manage mental health situations.

Especially important to the police force is the Dispatch Unit. The Jury was told that those who work in dispatch earn up to \$8/hour less than neighboring jurisdictions. Per the 2021 budget hearings, total calls into dispatch in 2020-21 reached 83,340, of which more than half were for police and 9-1-1 calls. Of those, 26,918 resulted in a police response. For the past six years, Dispatch has been short-staffed, and at times patrol officers were required to fill in.

The LPD wants to restore all these teams, and the first, a Special Investigations Unit formed in July 2021, has been reinstated. Team members – two officers and a Corporal – will cover

gangs, narcotics, and violent crime. Gathering information, the team will account for emerging crime patterns. The officers will not be in uniform. This approach has already been successful: in the short time between July and October 2021, there were 12 felony arrests, of which nine were gang-related or gang-associated, and nine firearms seized, among which three were ghost guns (a gun without a serial number).

The next position likely to be filled is the School Resource Officer.

At the moment, proactive traffic supervision is taking place through a \$32,500 grant from the Office of Traffic Safety Grants that allows periodic deployment. The grant has covered some enforcement on red lights, speeding, and distracted driving; it has also paid for weekend DUI checks. LPD is still waiting for funding for a dedicated motor officer to be reinstated.

Dispatch has also seen improvement. The nine positions are currently filled, and a dispatch supervisor has been hired. To the credit of the Dispatch Unit, it recently passed a security audit.

Concerns about public safety have brought about a community response. At the beginning of 2021 there were several public forums regarding violence. Church groups and non-profits have offered help in various types of community outreach. Volunteers from these organizations have proposed assisting with non-violent crime or mental health incidents. CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets), originating in Oregon, has approached the LPD offering unarmed crisis professionals to respond to diverted calls. Other local organizations have shown willingness to support community involvement. The LPD is willing to work with community groups, but it stated that it cannot assume financial responsibility. As for dealing with mental health calls, Santa Barbara County is hoping to fund one more Co-Response team for North County, with a law enforcement officer and a mental health clinician, and the City of Santa Maria recently added its own team. These teams should be able to respond more quickly to calls for mutual aid assistance.

Lompoc Jail

Although the Lompoc Jail is old, it still has some usefulness. Typically, there would be 1,400-1,500 bookings per year. The new emergency regulation of zero bail and the COVID pandemic have resulted in fewer people staying in the jail, and there were only 810 bookings in 2020. Nonetheless, the Lompoc Jail provides needed booking services and short-term holds for the Sheriff's Office, the California Highway Patrol, Probation, Santa Maria Police Department, Guadalupe Police Department, and Vandenberg Space Force.

There have been vacant positions at the jail for the past few years. It is authorized for four positions, but only two positions are filled. Moreover, there is no female officer. The LPD has trained two female dispatchers to book and search any female arrestees when needed.

Some aspects of the Lompoc Jail are improving. A Jail Supervisor was hired in 2020, and the Jail passed inspection by the Bureau of State Community Corrections. The Jail will stay open. When the Northern Branch Jail opens 24 miles away at the beginning of 2022, however, there might be a shift in the need for the Lompoc Jail in the future.

The Lompoc Jail is part of the Police Department building, which has had numerous problems in the past few years. It does not meet the requirements of the California Essential Services Act in terms of fire, safety, energy, and accessibility, nor does it have enough power for the headquarters of a police department and mobile command. The building may be beyond

repair and in need of a complete remodel. The \$10,000,000 budgeted for refurbishment is unfunded.

Looking forward, the idea of one public safety building for three departments has been proposed. The building would hold space for the police department, the fire department, and the Emergency Operations Center. This step forward by City Hall would require a public vote on a municipal bond or Certificate of Participation, a lease-financing agreement to acquire property. As the City grows, this option may become more viable. Of major consideration is the recommendation that municipal agencies band together for access to American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding, which focuses on helping communities recover from disasters such as the pandemic. Although ARPA funding is not meant to target police departments for their specific needs, certain areas can be funded.

Equipment

A police force depends on certain equipment, without which it cannot function, namely vehicles, radios, and nowadays, body cameras. LPD has been making do with outdated equipment. This has hindered its responsiveness in answering calls from the community.

The radios used by the LPD are over 30 years old and not encrypted. It is said that anyone can listen in on the police radio calls. Now, regulations require new radios be encrypted. They are also required to be two-way for fire and Emergency Medical Services and must adhere to the federal requirement of 700-800 MHz for optimal transmission.

The outdated radio system presents some danger to the Department. Outside the city limits, there are dead spots for the car radios. To remedy this, LPD will need towers and repeaters, plus modules for dispatchers. The dispatchers themselves have problems hearing scratchy transmissions. When they have to ask the officers to repeat, it can put the officers and public in danger.

The Department states that they will need 80 new portable digital radios with enhanced infrastructure, 30 vehicle radios, and 5 dispatch consoles. The basic cost as outlined in the current budget would be \$650,000. With the enhanced infrastructure, repeaters, and modules for dispatchers, the cost would be well over \$1.3 million. That amount is unfunded in the budget. The LPD is willing to phase all this equipment in over the next five years because of the high expense, but another possibility comes with the ARPA money. For officer safety, the \$650,000 for radio communications has moved up to #1 on the list of priorities for ARPA funding. Communication systems, especially for emergencies, can access ARPA funding.

The Department is asking for upgrades to the Records Unit in addition to radios. The Records Unit processes all police reports, storing traffic and parking tickets, as well as video evidence. It processed 8,298 crime reports in 2020, and all these are subject to Public Records Act requests. The estimated cost would be \$661,185.

To bring the LPD into the twenty-first century, it also needs body cameras. Body cameras rank #2 in importance in funding priority. In the age of social media, the police need their own videotaped evidence for testimony. Also, video footage can be used to comply with Public Records Act requests. Body cameras require more than the cameras themselves. Videos need to be processed and stored; then a discovery unit of two sworn officers and two technicians needs to manage the system and search for footage. The current ARPA funding request for the cameras is \$521,000, and the additional costs for personnel and software will total over \$1 million. ARPA funding can be used for body cameras if an association can be made with increased violence in

the community due to the pandemic. The citizens' survey of how to spend money to reinforce the Police Department supports body cameras as the highest priority.

LPD has 30 vehicles, but the poor state of the fleet has brought forth the comment that the force is struggling to meet its standard patrol duties. Per LPD's budget, 80 percent of the existing fleet has been extended beyond the recommended life cycle. Vehicles are in the shop constantly, and replacement parts have become difficult to find. Vehicles have broken down on the way to answering calls, resulting in officers having to ride together as a unit to reach the destination. The Department was able to buy four new vehicles with the 2020-21 budget, but their frequent use has aged them prematurely. The requested amount for additional vehicles is \$805,000, and it is the #3 priority in ARPA funding requests. While ARPA funding is not meant to help police departments, it can be used for transportation for emergency response services.

Dispatch has already been allocated \$280,000 from the City's budget for installation and maintenance of a computer phone system. It will include analytics, touch screen monitors, and headsets. For further upgrades, such as the computer-aided dispatch system, Dispatch is #4 in line with an ARPA funding request for \$1 million. It too is an emergency communication system.

The City of Lompoc is committed to fulfilling the requests of the LPD through its budget or through allowable ARPA funds. Allocations of those Federal funds were not finalized at the time of this report.

CONCLUSION

Public safety in Lompoc has been a concern of increasing importance over the past five years. To promote growth, the City needs a safe environment. The Police Department had been stripped of so many resources that it had become difficult to safeguard the community. However, new faces in City government, new money coming in, and new energy are providing a path to recovery.

Under assured leadership, the Lompoc Police Department has been able to effect positive changes including improved staffing and equipment. It is hiring new officers, redeploying specialized units, and replacing outdated cars and radios. The City is doing its best to maintain the strength of the police force by enabling these changes in its budget. Without the working partnership between the Police Department and the City Council, nothing else works. The citizens of Lompoc have understood this and have supported the steps necessary to build a safe and proud community.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1

The Lompoc Police Department needs a Co-Response team dedicated to its geographical area.

Recommendation 1

That the Lompoc City Council negotiate with the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office and the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors on behalf of the Department of Behavioral Wellness to add a Co-Response team dedicated to the Lompoc Valley.

Finding 2

The Lompoc Police Department is short-staffed and has been for a number of years, causing gaps in service.

Recommendation 2

That the Lompoc City Council explore the option of contracting with the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office for targeted support while the Lompoc Police Department returns to full strength.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

Pursuant to *California Penal Code Section 933 and 933.05*, the Santa Barbara County Grand Jury requests each entity or individual named below to respond to the enumerated findings and recommendations within the specified statutory time limit:

Responses to Findings shall be either:

- Agree
- Disagree wholly
- Disagree partially with an explanation

Responses to Recommendations shall be one of the following:

- Has been implemented, with brief summary of implementation actions taken
- Will be implemented, with an implementation schedule
- Requires further analysis, with analysis completion date of no more than six months after the issuance of the report
- Will not be implemented, with an explanation of why

Lompoc City Council – 90 days

Findings 1, 2

Recommendations 1, 2

Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors – 90 days

Finding 1

Recommendation 1

Santa Barbara County Sheriff Office – 60 days

Finding 1

Recommendation 1