Police, school officials discuss station at LaVenture

By PETER KELLEY
Staff Writer

MOUNT VERNON — Mount Vernon police and school-district officials are talking about installing a neighborhood police station on the property of LaVenture Middle School.

"It's not designed to be public relations," police Lt. Chris Cammock told the Mount Vernon School Board earlier this week after giving a presentation. "It's designed to be for problem solving."

Cammock said the police have been considering the idea for about three years, as they have watched crime levels rise in the North 26th Street area neighborhood.

Cammock said that neighborhood includes all properties along and near North 26th Street, including North 30th Street, LaVenture Middle School and Skagit Valley College.

Cammock said the North 26th Street area received 527 calls for police service in 1996, more than any other area in the west part of Mount Vernon. The majority of those calls were for noise disturbances and domestic trouble. In all there were 60 different kinds of calls, he said.

Cammock said police propose using one of the school district's existing portable classrooms and moving it to the northeast corner of the property. It would be fenced, given three parking spaces and a wheelchair-access ramp. The project would cost the school district nothing, he said.

He told the board the LaVenture property is best suited for a station.

"Ideally we'd like to be right in the middle of the neighborhood and not show favoritism, but unfortunately, geography won't allow us to do that," he said.

Cammock stressed that the station would not serve as a precinct house and that suspects would not be interviewed there. Such a station would shorten response times in the North 26th Street neighborhood and enable police to increase their community-based approach to reducing crime in the area, he said.

Though expressing interest, board members asked Cammock about the rationale behind the idea.

Board member Antonio Rodriguez said residents in the affected area didn't seem to know about the project. He asked, "Is this because you want a faster response time or a police presence there?" asked board member Antonio Rodriguez.

Cammock said the station would focus on the needs of the neighborhood. "It's an educational source and a commitment to policing of the neighborhood," he said.

Rodriguez asked Cammock if officers working in the station would be bilingual. Cammock said the officer is not, but could learn to speak Spanish.

Rodriguez said today he wondered what the root causes are for the proposed station. Though he supports community policing, Rodriguez said he remains uncertain what the underlying motives are for this station.

Rodriguez said he doesn't think the police are targeting the area because it has a large number of Hispanics families. But he said the police need to be sensitive to Hispanic issues.

"I want to know what they are going to do to ensure there's some cultural sensitive there," Rodriguez. said.

Board member Jerome Chandler asked if the police had studied the danger of people getting a "watchtower perception" of the school district, as if the area near its school needed added protection against crime.

Cammock said the project would need to answer such misperceptions.

He said police conducted foot patrols in the neighborhood this summer. At first, he said, residents assumed the officers were there for arrests. But as they got used to the daily presence, he said, that attitude changed.

"By the end of the emphasis, residents were walking along with the officers. We can't overcome those barriers without being there to explain our position," he said.

LaVenture Principal Tara Dowd, said she supports the project.

"We all know there was a murder of a cab driver last year at LaVenture," she said. "I can't help but think if we'd had this presence so near, that might not have happened."

"It's quite obvious you've done your homework," board President Richard Roozen told Cammock. "From my point of view this is 100 percent the right idea."

The board will discuss the matter

Mayor continues to seek new police offices

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"Just voting no doesn't change the need (for a new police station) one iota," Richendrfer said. Besides, he said, the majority of voters approved of the bond.

About 57 percent voted yes in the Nov. 4 election, but because bonds always need a 60-percent approval rate to pass, that majority was about 150 votes short of the mark.

Richendrfer said he's more inclined to pay attention to the 57 percent who said yes than he is to be daunted that the bond didn't get the full 60 percent it needed. That's why he's willing to bounce right back from a loss in the general elections with another bond issue, he said.

"Instead of what part of no don't you understand, it's more like, what part of yes are you not hearing," Richendrfer said.

The city has been trying for about a decade to find a new home for the police department. The building downtown is too small, officials say. It was built in the 1960s for a police force about a third of its present size.

Police Chief Mike Barsness said he expects the size of the police department to nearly double during the next 20 years, making finding a new building unavoidable.

Barsness said working in a cramped building limits the effectiveness of his department, creates a dangerous civil liability and dampens the morale of the police force.

"There has to be a change," Barsness said.

The election-day defeat was especially disheartening to Barsness because members of the police force personally campaigned for a bigger building and feel they can't go on much longer with the lack of space, he said.

"They all realize that this just can't be," Barsness said.

But voters don't seem to agree. This last bond failure was the third in a little more than 10 years.

Proposals for a $2.8-million building in 1986 and a $4-million building in 1992 both died at the polls.

Richendrfer said one of the reasons he thinks the bond issue failed this time is because it was too complicated.

The bond language was tied to the fate of the county's Proposition 911, a levy which would have funded a county-wide enhanced-911 dispatch center. Proposition 911 failed as well.

"The ballot issue in February will be a very black-and-white issue," Richendrfer said. "Shall the city of Mount Vernon purchase a new police facility, yes or no?"

The city's new public-safety bond will share the ballot with a maintenance-and-operations levy from the Mount Vernon School District.

Along with announcing the impending bond issue, Richendrfer recanted his earlier statement that the $25,000 the city initially deposited to hold the deal until the November elections would be lost of the bond didn't pass.

Realtor Jim Koetje, who's brokering the deal, said that money is being held in escrow and will be returned to the city if the deal finally fails.

Richendrfer said the misunderstanding was due to his misreading of the purchase document.