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Parks wants to raid trash fee intended to hire police officers

By Rick Orlov, Staff Writer
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Despite vowing that a trash-fee hike last year would be used only to hire more police officers, Los Angeles City Councilman Bernard Parks is suggesting reducing officer hiring and diverting the funds to balance a shaky city budget.

Citing overspending by the Los Angeles Police Department, Parks said Monday that he plans to suggest the moves to Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa as a way to rein in spending and balance the city's budget.

"This is one of the things that happens when departments don't live within their budget," said Parks, a former LAPD chief and one of the department's sharpest critics.

"I want to talk to the mayor that if we keep spending at the rate we are, how does he expect to hire as many new officers as he plans this year. How do we bring (spending) back in line?"

The call comes as projections are grim for next fiscal year's budget.

Some city departments - including the LAPD - already have overspent their budgets this year and the city recently approved a five-year salary deal with six Los Angeles unions that includes incentives that could boost the cost of the contract to nearly \$300million.

The move to divert funds raised from the trash-fee hike is the second effort to tap into that pot of money. Late last year, the City Council moved to use some of the money for anti-gang programs.

But that effort was blocked by Villaraigosa, whose office said he would fight any effort to use the money raised from

the trash-fee hike for anything but police hiring.

On Monday, the mayor reiterated his stance.

"The mayor is drawing a line in the sand," said spokesman Matt Szabo. "He strongly opposes the council putting any arbitrary caps on police hiring."

The trash-fee hike, which is now \$26 a month and brings in about \$150million a year, was pushed by Villaraigosa with promises that all of it would go to offset the cost of hiring new officers.

Villaraigosa's office said plans are on track to hire 780 new officers this year toward his goal of expanding the force by 1,000 officers.

But when the hike was imposed, it was not earmarked for a specific purpose in the budget - raising concerns even at the time that it could be diverted for other uses.

"The money was designed to offset the cost of trash collection with the idea that would free up money to hire police officers," City Administrative Officer Karen Sisson said.



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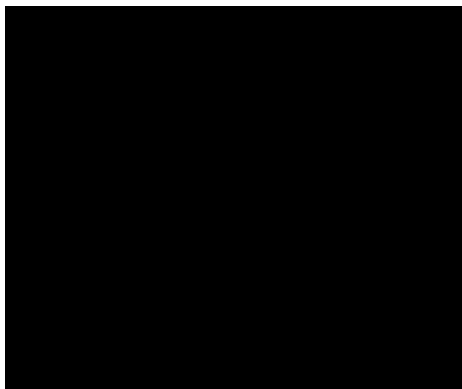
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"If there is any change in that policy, it would require a decision by the mayor and City Council. At this point, we are not changing how we budget."

But Parks, who chairs the council's Budget and Finance Committee, said the city's economic condition has deteriorated so significantly that it has virtually no contingency fund for emergencies.

Meanwhile, he said, the LAPD reported that it expects to exceed its \$86million overtime budget by \$13million this year.

"And that's their estimate after only two months into the year," Parks said. "This department has a history of overspending, no matter what the budget is for them."

The city might not need to hire as many new officers this year because of the reduced rate of attrition among veterans, he said.

The city had anticipated upward of 500 officers leaving this year, but now estimates that it could be just 300 or 400.

The LAPD is the biggest department in the city, with a budget of \$1.9billion.

"A department that large can throw the whole city budget off if it overspends," Parks said. "In the past, other departments have been able to come up with money to help the LAPD. Now they can't afford to do it."

"Do we cut out services at parks because the LAPD can't manage its budget? Do we reduce library hours? These are all important services."

Councilman Jack Weiss, who chairs the council's Public Safety Committee, said he believes that the LAPD should not be punished because the council did not give it enough money to operate.

"I don't see what the problem is," Weiss said. "If we are paying more in overtime, that means there are more cops on the street. I think that's good. We should have budgeted more for the LAPD in the first place and we wouldn't be having this argument now."

"The highest priority in this city should be funding new cops," Weiss said. "Part of that priority is to fund the cops that exist and part of that priority is to hire new cops. I think we should do both."

LAPD officials said the overtime is primarily for expanding patrols and court time.

The department is budgeted for 1.2million hours of overtime even as it is on track to work 1.5million hours - about the same as last year.

The issue of police overtime developed after concern that the department was reducing its patrols of housing projects in the city.

The department estimates it will need upward of \$6million to keep the patrols operating.

"I don't understand what the department doesn't understand," Parks said. "It has to reduce its overtime by 300,000 hours to live within its budget."

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