

Posted 11/9/07

JUST HOW THIN IS L.A.'S THIN BLUE LINE?

How many cops does L.A. need? How many can it afford?

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Determined to make good on his pledge to add a thousand cops post haste, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio V. ridiculed Councilman Bernie Parks' call to limit this fiscal year's hiring to no more than 226. But Parks, a member of the Council's budget committee, insisted that his number is all the budget allows, and even took a swing at his arch-nemesis, Chief "Hollywood" Bill Bratton, for chronic over-spending. Maybe it was only Bernie being Bernie; after all, it's pretty obvious that he's still nursing a grudge for only getting one term at the department's helm. The ex-Generalissimo has been particularly hard on his replacement, criticizing him, among other things, for adopting the three-twelve plan, pulling senior lead officers off the street, relaxing hiring standards, bullying the homeless and, perhaps the most bitter pill of all, taking credit for the plunging crime rate -- a rate that was going down during Parks' tenure.

Ego battles aside, is Hizzoner right? Is our line *that* thin? Comparing Los Angeles and New York yields some tantalizing clues. Bill Bratton's former stomping ground boasts an officer/citizen ratio *nearly twice as high* as Los Angeles' (35,690 officers: 44.1/10,000 v. 9,393 officers: 24.6/10,000.) Since its residents are also stuffed into a much smaller geographical area, New York's effective police presence is *more than five times L.A.'s* (321 sq. mi. = 111 officers/sq. mile v. 469.1 sq. mi. = 20 officers/sq. mile). So that's why cops seem so ubiquitous in the Big Apple! If we believe that a visible police presence helps deter crime, the fact that New York's 2006 violent crime rate was *twenty percent lower* than L.A.'s makes perfect sense (637.9/100,000 v. 786.8/100,000). NYPD's arguable officer surplus also makes it far better positioned to staff specialized crime-fighting units and shift officers around in response to evolving crime patterns.

But can we really afford more cops? Raising L.A.'s trash rates might eventually get us over the 10,000 officer hump...but twice as many? How *does* New York pay for its army of blue-suits? That's easy: they pay them less -- a lot less. Believe it or not, NYPD officers start at (don your breathing gear) \$25,100 per year. That's right -- twenty-five thousand one-hundred, and not a nickel more! But wait: after completing a six-month academy they're bumped to...\$32,700, which should at least get those without dependents off food stamps. After five and one-half years NYPD patrol officers make \$59,588, maybe as much as \$70,000 including overtime. Does that sound better? It's only a hair above what an LAPD rookie *starts at*.

Given Southern California police salaries, substantially changing L.A.'s police/citizen ratio would require huge infusions of cash. (Since population density is low, greatly increasing police visibility is virtually a non-starter.) Where would the money come from? You guessed it: social services, trash collection, road repairs, park maintenance, etcetera. For those old enough to remember, it was precisely the robbing Peter to pay Paul dilemma that led LAPD Lieutenant-turned-Mayor Tom Bradley to put the kabosh on the department's expansion during the seventies and eighties. Instead, we started paying officers better -- a lot better. And now we're caught in the horns of another dilemma.

Is Parks just another ex-cop turning against the police? Or does he recognize that L.A. can't afford many more cops? Goals like "a thousand" might make for a great soundbite, but unless L.A. wants to wind up in a San-Diego-like financial meltdown it must come to grips with the short and long-term financial consequences of expanding the police.