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Police Costs Becoming Unsustainable, Lafayette and Orinda Consider Alternatives

By *Cathy Tyson*

City Manager Steven Falk wanted to make it perfectly clear, "We are highly satisfied with the service level we receive from the Sheriff's Office - on countless occasions they have gone above and beyond the call." Both Lafayette and Orinda currently contract with the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office (CCCSO) for police services.

Although content with the level and quality of service, concern about future police services cost increases spurred Lafayette and Orinda to hire Matrix Consulting Group to analyze current and potential future expenses. Matrix found that not only are the costs not controllable, their report states: "Future Contra Costa County Sheriff's costs are unsustainable due to rising retirement benefit structures."

The consultant looked at best, worst and middle of the road scenarios to get a clear picture of future costs. "Due to uncertainties and conflicting information provided to the cities regarding Contra Costa County pension cost trends, it is challenging to forecast Sheriff's contract costs with any precision. This being the case, our analysis compares estimated costs for alternative police service delivery systems against three CCCSO pension scenarios, six year increases of 20%, 50% and 100% to determine relative cost efficiency."

Both Falk and Orinda City Manager Janet Keeter share a host of additional unknowns that will make any decision on what to do about police services even more challenging. A few of these include: the exact increase of Sheriff's Office costs over time; what happens when the current sheriff steps down? - his replacement may have a different philosophy toward contract cities; will other cities want to come together to form a police department?

Five alternative service options were proposed by the consultant: 1) creation of a Lafayette Police Department and an Orinda Police Department, 2) contracting with the City of Walnut Creek, 3) creation of a Danville-Lafayette-Orinda Police Department 4) creation of a Lafayette-Orinda Police Department, 5) creation of a Lafayette-Moraga-Orinda Police Department.

While the report recommended, "The City should move forward with further exploration of forming a partnership with Orinda and / or Moraga," both City Managers plan to take it slow - present the findings to their respective city councils - and try to narrow down and clarify some of the unknowns.

Lamorinda is not alone in wrestling with what to do about police services. Danville also used Matrix consulting to look at potential new police services options. The firm recommended that they discontinue contracting with the Sheriff's Office and start their own police department. San Ramon left the Sheriff's Office and started its own force two years ago.

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