

Mission Hills LAPD Station Is Dedicated

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Fulfilling a long-sought goal, Los Angeles officials dedicated a police station in Mission Hills on Saturday — the first new area station built in the city since 1978.

About 2,000 people lustily cheered City Councilman Alex Padilla, who played a key role in the creation of the station; LAPD Chief William J. Bratton other police officials; and Mayor James K. Hahn.

Capt. Kirk J. Albanese, the station's area commander, said that for the 250 officers at the new station to succeed, they will need the help of community residents.

"Our report card will be our ability to reduce the number of victims in our community," Albanese, a 24-year veteran of the force, told the crowd. "Come here and participate."

To demonstrate his commitment to community policing, Albanese said that today, the station's first day of operations, officers will be dispatched throughout the community, including to stores and parks, to seek input from residents on how to fight crime.

Violent crime in the San Fernando Valley has declined 35% so far this year, according to Los Angeles Police Department figures released in April.

The Mission Area Police Station, at North Sepulveda and San Fernando Mission boulevards, will serve about 201,000 residents in a 28-square-mile area encompassing Sylmar, Mission Hills, North Hills, Panorama City and part of Granada Hills.

Those residents had been served primarily by the Devonshire and Foothill stations. The new station should sharply reduce response times, police leaders said Saturday.

In addition to speeches, the ceremony featured music by high school bands and an aerial display by the department's Metro Division. As the theme from "Mission: Impossible" blared over loudspeakers, a Metro helicopter flew overhead and then hovered near the station roof. Officers slid down ropes to the roof, briefly disappeared and then rappelled down the front wall of the station.

Hahn referred to the "Mission: Impossible" theme in his speech, noting that people had doubted that the station would ever be built. He lavished praise on Bratton, whom he hired after dismissing Bernard C. Parks.

"We see a new spirit under the leadership of Chief Bill Bratton," Hahn said, citing lower citywide crime rates — a key theme in his reelection bid against Council-

man Antonio Villaraigosa.

The mayor said that a new station clearly was needed because of dramatic growth in the Valley. "Isn't it great to see a station here where we need it?"

Saturday's dedication of the department's 19th area station marked the culmination of a 16-year campaign.

In April 1989, voters overwhelmingly approved Proposition 2, a \$176-million bond measure to build and remodel police stations.

San Fernando Valley residents thought they would soon be getting a new station, because of the area's rapid growth. But within two years, it became clear that city officials had dramatically underestimated construction costs, and the Valley station was cut from the bond project list. Valley voters said they had been misled.

In 1999, Padilla, who had been a junior at San Fernando High School when the measure passed, was elected to the City Council to represent the 7th District in the north central Valley.

Padilla said Saturday that he immediately began looking for funds to get a station built, and received assistance from then-Mayor Richard Riordan. Padilla said he drove around looking for sites and soon found a property at 11121 Sepulveda Blvd. owned by Chrysler Corp. In October 1999, the City Council approved a \$4-million down payment on the parcel, which is north of the 118 Freeway, between the 5 and 405 freeways.

City officials estimated at the time that the new station would open by June 2003.

"This is a great day for the San Fernando Valley," Padilla said Saturday. Echoing Albanese, the councilman said that the police "cannot improve public safety without the help of the community."

Also praising the station's opening were Councilmen Tony Cardenas and Greig Smith, whose districts will be served by officers from the station. City Atty. Rocky Delgadillo introduced Deputy City Atty. Ayelet Levy, who has been assigned to the station. "Send the bad guys to her," Delgadillo said.

Mack Torres, 74, a retired painter and lifetime area resident, said he had received an invitation from Padilla's office to attend the dedication. "We're glad to see the new station. We feel safer," Torres said.

Lauri Holbrook, who grew up in Sylmar and now recruits students for UCLA, said she was surprised that the new station became a reality.

"I was very surprised. I didn't think there would be another station because of all the budget problems," she said.