

Mayor's office staged forum or, with a squeeze
By James Nash, Staff Writer

Mayor James Hahn's office drummed up support for his latest tax-hike plan to hire more cops by orchestrating a news event with community groups and providing talking points for their speakers, according to documents obtained by the Daily News under a public-records request.

Hahn's role in staging the event -- which was attended by victims-rights and anti-crime groups -- drew criticism Monday from his mayoral rivals, who accused him of staging the event to help his re-election campaign that is centered on reducing crime.

Opponents of raising taxes said the effort looked more like "AstroTurf" than a true grass-roots campaign.

"(Hahn) is really in a gray area here," said Kris Vosburgh, executive director of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, the largest single contributor to the campaign against a countywide police-tax initiative on the Nov. 2 ballot.

"It probably wouldn't be so bad if this were the only gray area surrounding this mayor. But there has been a consistent policy of him, if not stepping across the line, at least stepping very close to the line."

Hahn spokeswoman Shannon Murphy said the mayor's top priority is reducing crime and that Hahn is reaching out to neighborhood councils and business groups to advance that goal.

"Victims of crime agree that we need more cops," Murphy said. "To say that these mothers of murdered children are supporting Mayor Hahn's push to hire more cops for any other reason is insulting and outrageous."

The county ballot measure would have expanded the 9,200-officer Los Angeles Police Department by about 1,200 officers and added sheriff's deputies and police in other cities through a half-percent increase in the sales tax. It fell short of the two-thirds margin it needed to pass.

Since its defeat, Hahn has pushed for a half-percent city sales-tax increase to hire more officers. He has made reducing crime the centerpiece of his re-election campaign.

Two of Hahn's campaign rivals, Richard Alarcon and Bernard Parks, criticized the mayor's role in organizing the Dec. 8 press conference and feeding six "talking points" to speakers. The talking points, which were obtained under the California Public Records Act, did not mention Hahn by name but spelled out his position on expanding the Police Department through a tax measure.

"Given that this is not formally a campaign, I still believe it's wrong for the mayor to use his office staff to promote what could become a campaign issue for the mayor," said Alarcon, a Democratic state senator from Van Nuys.

"To use city staff on the taxpayers' dime to essentially promote a ballot measure is wrong."

Parks, a city councilman forced out as police chief by Hahn, said the mayor acted improperly in staging the event and should seek other ways to expand the LAPD rather than campaigning for a new tax.

"If you have an outgrowth of concern or interest in the community, that's totally different from you having an idea and busing in people to support your point of view. That's a news conference that's manufactured as opposed to an outgrowth of community concern."

Campaigns for Hahn's other major rivals, Antonio Villaraigosa and Robert Hertzberg, did not respond to requests for comment Monday.

Speakers at the Dec. 8 press conference included representatives of Women Against Gun Violence, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Loved Ones Victim Services, the Domestic Abuse Center and Rainbow Services Inc., which provides services to victims of domestic violence.

Tina Pasco, executive director of MADD's Los Angeles chapter, was among the speakers at the press conference and the only one to respond to requests for comment Monday.

Pasco said she spoke in response to a request from Hahn's Criminal Justice Planning Office but spoke only to advance the idea of expanding the LAPD, not Hahn's political fortunes.

"That's the only thing anybody spoke about, and that was increasing the size of the Police Department to make this a safer community," Pasco said.

"Whenever politicians have come to us to ask for our support, we tell them that we support issues but not individuals. We see the devastating consequences of crime."