

# Los Angeles Daily News

## Police alarm policy on ice Council overrides police board, chief

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Councilmember Janice Hahn objects to the recent announcement by the LAPD to ignore burglar alarms. (Phil McCarten / Daily News)

**Tuesday, January 14, 2003** - Brushing aside the Police Commission and Chief William Bratton, the Los Angeles City Council took over the decision Tuesday whether to halt police investigations of unverified burglar alarm calls. The council voted 12-1 vote to overrule the commission's action to end police responding to burglar alarms. The action followed more than an hour of testimony before a crowd of hundreds of outraged residents and business people objecting to the commission's decision.

"In my neighborhood we have many elderly people," said Robert Bonfiglio of Van Nuys. "God forbid something happens and these people can't get to the phone. What happens? They lay there. The threat of home invasion is scary to most people. So picture a person with a gun to your head and you're not able to answer the phone."

Older residents, business owners and others crowded into the council chambers, many of them spurred by disturbing alerts issued by alarm companies which warned the new policy would open the door to crime sprees.

"Having an alarm in your business or residence used to be a deterrent," said Robert McKoy, president of the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce. "Unfortunately, if this stands it will be an invitation to burglars."

At issue is whether the Los Angeles Police Department should stop sending officers to calls from burglar alarms unless someone, such as a resident, a neighbor or a security guard, verifies it is not a false alarm.

In 2001, the Police Department logged 123,254 calls originating from burglar alarms, and 97 percent of those were false alarms. Only one person was arrested as a result of all those calls, city officials said.

On Tuesday of last week, the Police Commission voted to prohibit officers from responding to unverified alarms, saying they consume about 15 percent of officers' patrol time and the department needs those officers to respond to real problems like gang crime.

"It doesn't just make good sense to continue operating in the manner that we have been," Assistant Police Chief Jim McDonnell told the council Tuesday.

San Pedro-area Councilwoman Janice Hahn cited the 3 percent of burglar-alarm calls that were authentic calls for help -- more than 3,800 incidents during 2001 -- and argued that the city's advisory neighborhood councils were never notified of the policy change, which she said is required by the City Charter.

"There has been no decision that I can think of lately that most directly impacts people where they sleep -- in their beds -- than this decision to have a blanket policy of nonresponse to burglar alarms," Hahn said.

Hahn's position puts her at odds with her brother, Mayor James Hahn, who supports the position by the commission and Bratton.

"This is a bad message at a time when we're trying to make Los Angeles the safest big city in America," she said, borrowing an oft-used phrase from the mayor.

Only Councilwoman Cindy Miscikowski, chairwoman of the council's Public Safety Committee, dissented.

The vote means the council will have three weeks to discuss the matter in committee and vote whether to veto the commission's policy and tell the five police commissioners to rethink the issue.

"We are facing a critical situation," said Councilman Hal Bernson, who represents the northwest San Fernando Valley.

"I think there's a happy medium," Bernson said, suggesting that the solution might be a charge to the alarm companies or a response fee for users. "It boils down to the fact that the public has got to be protected."

Members of the public offered their own suggestions, even raising the annual city fee for a burglar alarm.

"I would like for you to consider possibly a raise in fee from \$30 to \$50 for the permit and one free false alarm per year," said Vera Orbin of Tujunga. "I don't think we should all suffer for the (false alarm) abusers."