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Policy Alarms Council

Members vote to reconsider police decision not to respond to unverified alarms.

By Patrick McGreevy
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The Los Angeles City Council voted Tuesday to reconsider a Police Commission order to stop responding to burglar alarms unless they are verified, after an outcry from homeowners and merchants and lobbying by the alarm industry.

The 12-1 vote gives the council 21 days to hold hearings and either veto the new policy by a two-thirds vote or let it stand.

The council acted after the first major show of force by the city's newly organized network of neighborhood councils. After the alarm industry and Councilwoman Janice Hahn notified neighborhood council representatives, more than 120 opponents packed the Council Chambers, including leaders from Tarzana, Wilmington, Cypress Park, San Pedro, Harbor Gateway, Watts, Mount Washington and Miracle Mile.

Hahn, who led the opposition to the policy in the City Council, said the reformed City Charter approved by voters four years ago requires major issues that affect neighborhoods to first be submitted to neighborhood councils for input.

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

The policy, which has not yet taken effect, directs officers not to respond to burglar alarms unless they are verified as genuine by a property owner or private security company.

Police Commission Executive Director Joe Gunn said that only 6% of the city's residents have burglar alarms, and that the alarm companies profit from the LAPD's current practice of being the first responder to most calls.

"Ninety-four percent of the public is subsidizing the other 6% by making the Police Department respond for alarm companies. That is not acceptable," Gunn said.

But Hahn said she will push for a veto after council members have a chance to draft an alternate approach that reduces false alarms, possibly by increasing fines for non-genuine calls.

Councilwoman Cindy Miscikowski opposed Hahn's action after LAPD officials said that 97% of the 123,000 alarm calls in 2001 were false. Responding to all calls resulted in one arrest the entire year.

"Police officers don't want to spend their time chasing the false alarms," Miscikowski said. "They want to be out there ... where we have violent crime. They want to be patrolling the business communities where we have real, recognized burglaries."

The false-alarm rate has dropped to 92% this year because of some reforms. But because false burglar alarms represent about 15% of all calls for police service, Police Chief William J. Bratton and the Police Commission support the new policy as a way to free up the equivalent of 40 additional officers.

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

Gunn said the alarm system needs reform.

"I'm not disappointed," Gunn said after the council vote. "I believe the council has a right to hear this and get more information. I would be disappointed if the next time we vote that they voted to override the commission because I believe what the commission did was in the best interest of the citizens of Los Angeles."

Mayor James K. Hahn weighed in on the issue for the first time Tuesday in support of Bratton.

"We should have the debate, but I would need some awfully tough convincing to disagree with the Police Commission's decision on the best use of Police Department resources," he said.

Dispatching police officers to false alarms, he added, is a drain on the department.

Hahn hopes that the policy will stand "because of the high number of false alarms, which take the time of officers who could otherwise be doing other things to protect the public," said Julie Wong, a spokeswoman for the mayor. She said the mayor understands the need to give neighborhood councils a chance to debate the new policy and advise city leaders.

The City Council is caught between not wanting to defy a popular new police chief and

not wanting to alienate residents at a time when seven council seats are up for election on the March 4 ballot.

"I know the chief supports this policy, but what I am asking you today is to respond to the people we represent," Councilwoman Hahn said.

The council voted to reconsider the policy after a two-hour public hearing at which more than 40 citizens voiced impassioned opposition to the policy, saying that the lack of a police response will encourage burglars and other criminals to break in to businesses and homes with alarms.

"In the past, having an alarm system on our business or residence was a deterrent," said Robert McKoy, a businessman who is president of the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce. "Unfortunately, if this stands it will be an invitation for burglars to pick on us all."

Added Jay Handal, a Brentwood merchant: "When you have a lag time in response you will cause loss of possessions and potential loss of life. If people die, that's on the council's hands."

Debra Krishel, a Brentwood resident, said the new policy is "absolutely ludicrous, if not terrifying," and said she fears that it will lead to more sexual assaults of women in their homes.

"By passing this [policy] we are telling criminals 'Come on in, the door is open. Don't worry. Nobody is going to show up, stay as long as you would like. Criminals can go block by block, house by house and help themselves.' "

Only one audience member, Hollywood activist Joe Shea, testified in favor of the new policy, saying that it would free up officers from responding to false alarms in wealthier neighborhoods so they can have a bigger presence in poor neighborhoods.

"What we are doing here is creating a class of the protected, a people who can afford these expensive alarms and who can be assured by their representatives that the police will come and respond to them," Shea said of the old policy.

Gunn said 39% of the city's 126,983 alarm subscribers are in the San Fernando Valley, 24% are in the LAPD's West Bureau, 21.7% are in the Central Bureau and 15% are in the South Bureau.

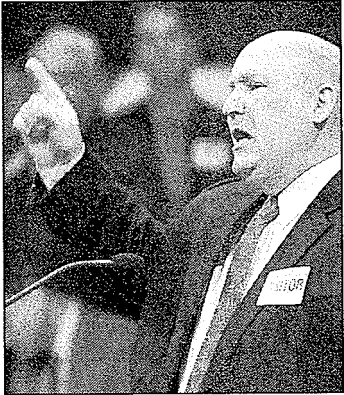
Councilman Nate Holden said the policy is "unintentionally sending a signal to the burglars and those who are going to rob you that 'Hey, it's OK. We are not going to come.' "

Gunn said the new policy would improve the response to alarms once they were verified. Because the vast majority of burglar alarms are false, police do not assign a high priority

to such calls, so officers often take 45 minutes or more to arrive. Under the new policy, once an alarm were verified as genuine, police would assign a high priority to the call, meaning that officers would arrive in 15 minutes, Gunn said.

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Times staff writer Beth Shuster contributed to this report.



SUPPORTER: *Hollywood activist Joe Shea speaks in favor of the new police policy, the only speaker to do so.*



Photographs by WALLY SEALIJ *Los Angeles Times*

OPPONENT: Councilwoman Janice Hahn listens as a homeowner speaks at the City Council meeting Tuesday. She led the successful drive to force a reconsideration of the Police Commission's new policy of allowing the Police Department to respond only to verified burglar alarms.