

Los Angeles Times

Alarm Plan Pits Police Against L.A. City Council

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January 16 2003

A proposal to stop police from responding to burglar alarms without proof of a real emergency has triggered a game of political pingpong between the Los Angeles Police Commission and the City Council.

Commissioners and police officials, who believe the alarm calls are a waste of time, are arrayed on one side. On the other are City Council members, a coalition of private alarm companies and a hastily assembled contingent of neighborhood advisory panels and business owners fearful of crime.

Changes in the City Charter, which have given more authority to a strong-willed Police Commission, helped bring on the impasse.

It's the newest political twist in a decades-old argument over who should pay for the cost of responding to false burglar alarms. The Los Angeles Police Department now answers tens of thousands of false alarm calls yearly, triggered by pets, children, gusts of wind. More than 90% of all burglar alarm calls are false.

But alarm companies, anxious to avoid higher costs, have fought to retain police response to their devices with a well-heeled lobby. They've mobilized their clients, who have argued that the change would give a green light to burglars. The City Council gave the alarm companies a partial victory Tuesday, agreeing to consider their appeal.

If the City Council vetoes the new policy, the matter will return to the Police Commission. And if the commission reaffirms its decision, the issue could bounce back and forth between the two indefinitely. City Charter changes approved in 1999 tempered the council's authority. The council, in effect, can only send the measure back, not kill it outright.

The alarm issue has bounced back and forth between government bodies for a generation. Over and over, police agencies across the country have argued that burglar alarm companies are burdening public resources. Over and over, alarm companies have resisted change.

As far back as the late 1960s, LAPD officials recall studying the problem of too many false alarms draining police resources.

A Protracted Fight

Around 1983, for example, a similar debate led to new fines against L.A. property owners for false alarms. In 1989, L.A. city officials cited continuing problems.

In 1994, the City Council entered into a protracted fight with alarm companies. A verification measure — much like the one being proposed now — died, but penalties for false alarms were tightened. And in 1998, then-LAPD Chief Bernard C. Parks also tried to face down the alarm lobby over the same issue, and lost.

Similar struggles have played out around the country, and in recent years the logjam has started to yield in favor of public agencies. At least eight cities nationwide now have ordinances similar to the one the Police Commission has proposed.

But most battled strong opposition. In Salt Lake City, alarm companies took out full-page newspaper advertisements. Despite the opposition, the measure passed two years ago, and the number of false alarms dropped from about 8,000 yearly to 893, police said. A total of 87 genuine alarms have been recorded in that period.

Salt Lake City's ordinance was considered so successful in freeing up police resources for better use that it was a semifinalist in this year's prestigious Innovations in American Government award contest sponsored by Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

But in Los Angeles, the measure has run up against community opposition, and that of the Los Angeles Security Alarm Assn, which has spent \$50,000 in recent months to hire a leading lobbyist.

Police officials argue that response to alarms will actually improve: Once a burglar alarm is verified, officers will be dispatched on a high-priority call, and will arrive much more quickly than they currently do when they receive a burglar alarm call — in about 10 minutes rather than about 45. And human-activated alarms, such as those in jewelry stores, would still trigger police response.

But the alarm industry has argued that a less-onerous compromise is possible — one that wouldn't favor firms that provide their own private-security response to verify alarms.

This is not the first time that the Police Commission and the City Council have differed over Police Department policies.

The two panels also clashed recently over the structure of a new risk-management division within the LAPD.

And over the past year, police commissioners have frequently underscored their independence from the council and other political leaders, emphasizing their authority to

set policy for the Police Department.

But for this issue, the commission's opponents used a new tool in the political arsenal: the city's network of nearly 60 advisory neighborhood councils, whose representatives turned out in force this week to oppose the change.

The saga began last April, when the Police Commission first voted to dust off the alarm issue. Commission President Rick Caruso said there were "multiple meetings" between alarm company representatives and the commission staff. "I personally met with them," Caruso said. But the two sides could not reach a compromise.

So on Jan. 7, the commission voted to approve L.A. Police Chief William J. Bratton's proposal to order officers to no longer respond to burglar alarms unless the alarms were verified as genuine by the property owner or a private security firm. Exceptions included alarms from firearms businesses.

Two days later, the alarm industry sent out tens of thousands of letters to its customers, chambers of commerce, homeowner associations and the leaders of neighborhood councils warning that the "non-response" policy would have a "significant impact" on all residents, not just those with burglar alarms.

Then the alarm industry and City Councilwoman Janice Hahn, the leading critic of the new alarm policy, notified the neighborhood councils that the issue was going to come up Tuesday. The result was a meeting packed with opponents from all over Los Angeles, including at least two dozen leaders of neighborhood councils.

Foes Gather Force

Janice Hahn touted the event as evidence of the neighborhood councils' new importance. The meeting signified that, "neighborhood councils are here to stay," Hahn said. "No commission is above neighborhood councils. Not the Police Commission, not the Harbor Commission. They want to be at the table when policies are made in the city."

Joe Gunn, executive director of the Police Commission, said his agency has held meetings in neighborhoods and worked with citizen police advisory groups. "We have no objection to the community participating," he said.

Gunn and other proponents said that the City Council intervention points more to the power of a special-interest lobby in city politics.

The city's poorest areas, they point out, have the smallest number of burglar alarms and suffer the most from serious crimes that require a police response.

Neither Gunn nor Caruso said they were surprised by the turn of events.

"It was made pretty clear to me that if the alarm industry didn't get what they were happy with at the commission level, they would take it to the council," Caruso said.