

LOS ANGELES

Softer L.A. false-alarm policy opposed

By Mariel Garza
Staff Writer

Rejecting City Council pressure, top Los Angeles Police Commission officials said Wednesday that they oppose softening a ban on officers responding to burglar alarms.

Both the council and a citizens task force endorsed a "three strikes, you're out" false alarm policy to replace the one adopted by the commission earlier this year, which requires a live person or video camera to verify a break-in before Los Angeles Police Department officers show up.

But the president and executive director of the Police Commission said Wednesday that the suggested alternative sets up a two-tier dispatch system that would be hard to keep track of and would open the city to liability if officers mistakenly don't respond. Plus, they said, it still would waste too much patrol time chasing alarm calls — more than 90 percent of which are false alarms.

"The question comes down to what's the right policy for the city, putting aside politics," said Police Commission President Rick Caruso. "I still feel the best interest of residents is to have the policy that the board originally adopted."

The full commission is set to consider the recommendations from the task force June 17. Sherry Lopez, a small-business operator in San Pedro, said she and her co-members of the Burglar Alarm Task Force thought the alternative was better for everyone in the city because it allowed three false alarms in a year before police ignore further alarms at that address. The council agreed.

"Not only am I surprised, I'm disappointed," Lopez said Wednesday after learning of the position taken by police

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commission officials. She vowed to keep fighting for the alternative policy.

"That's extremely disappointing because I think the task force came up with a much better response-policy recommendation," said Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who, along with Councilwoman Wendy Greuel, led a citizens uprising after the commission adopted the nonresponse policy in January.

And the claims that police can't track the false alarms on their computer systems ring false, she said.

"That makes me nervous that our Police Commission is saying it's too difficult, it's too hard to track this kind of information," Hahn said. "That is not a Police Department that's into the next millennium."

Caruso said the release of the report had nothing to do with the current fight between the mayor and the council over hiring more police officers, but he said the council is sending mixed signals by opposing the

mayor's plan for LAPD expansion while calling for police to respond to all burglar alarms.

"You can't have it both ways," Caruso said. "You can't say we're not going to provide funding for more officers but we want officers to be highly inefficient."

Police Commission Executive Director Dan Koenig did offer up a slight improvement in his report that urges the commission not to adopt the "three-strikes" part of the task force plan. Koenig suggests that nonverified burglar alarm calls could be given to dispatchers, who could broadcast them to patrol cars with low-priority status known as "broadcast and file," meaning officers can choose to respond if they are not busy.

Though it's an optional response for officers, the ringing alarms would at least be tracked in the computer and trends noted in locations, Koenig said.

Councilman Dennis Zine, a former LAPD officer who is often supportive of the Police Commission, called the broadcast-and-file option "window dressing" that makes a response essentially optional for nearby patrol units.

Supporters of the task force's policy hope they can work out a compromise before the strict alarm policy goes into effect July 1.

If not, then "they're making a big mistake," said George Gunning, a task force member as well as the co-owner of an alarm company and founding member of the Greater Los Angeles Security Alarm Association. "I definitely believe that Los Angeles is going down the road to invite the criminal element to become more active in the city," Gunning said.