



Group Puts Public Safety in Spotlight

The New Common Sense Coalition Wants 15 More Police Officers and New Fire Stations.

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The fledgling Common Sense Coalition intends to push for millions of dollars in spending for more police and firefighters in Madison.

The coalition, an eclectic mix of Madison leaders representing small business, labor developers and nonprofit groups, wants the city to add 15 more police officers and three more fire stations and required personnel to meet the demands of growth.

"We seem to find money for the things we want," said coalition member and Madison police union president Scott Favour. "Is public safety a priority for the city?"

The coalition, formed last month, has said it wants to promote centrist solutions to Dane County problems and promote economic development, public safety and education.

The proposal, unveiled in a two-page press release Tuesday, would cost millions of dollars and comes as the city faces a serious operating budget shortfall next year. The group offered no proposals for how to pay for the buildings or personnel.

The city, due to rising costs, must spend \$9.5 million more to continue the same level of services next year. But the limits on tax collections imposed in the new state budget signed by Gov. Jim Doyle on Monday allows the city to raise another \$6 million in taxes, leaving a \$3.5 million shortfall.

Mayor Dave Cieslewicz has already asked police, fire and other agencies to propose budgets with 3 percent cuts for next year, which could produce service cuts and layoffs in some areas.

"This is a mayor who has made public safety a top priority," Cieslewicz spokesman George Twigg, noting that the city's first new fire station in 30 years is about to be opened, a police station on the East Side is being added next year and the first ambulance in 15 years is being added.

"We're open to proposals to find improvements to public safety," Twigg said. "But it's going to be difficult to add new services when we're looking to cut spending by \$3.5 million. If you're adding something new for spending, you have to take something out. Is this going to come from snow plowing or trash pickup or some other service?"

City Council President Paul Van Rooy could not be reached Tuesday evening.

The city, Favour said, needs to add 15 officers in the next year or two -- at a cost of \$1.1 million -- to meet a targeted ratio of 1.8 officers per 1,000 residents.

The lack of coverage, he said, invites burglaries and other property crimes, especially on the underserved West Side.

The Fire Department, meanwhile, needs to add stations and personnel so firefighters and paramedics can reach areas within five minutes 90 percent of the time -- a national standard, according to coalition and Madison firefighters union member Tim Healy.

Now, the department's average response time is seven minutes and can be more than 12 minutes to some areas.

"The city's grown so fast we don't have it covered," Healy said. "Let's get going on another (station) right away."

It's the responsibility of elected officials, not responders, to set priorities and make tough budget choices, Healy said.

The coalition is also exploring a formula that would tie public safety spending and personnel to growth, expansion of the educational resource officer program into targeted middle schools, and putting cameras in all Madison Metro buses and transfer stations.

Cieslewicz opposes a strict formula for city spending and would consider more school resource officers but wants to know what would be sacrificed to pay for them. He's generally supportive of using cameras to reduce crime in and around buses, Twigg said.