

Compton Police Department to make a comeback?

City officials are considering reestablishing a local agency 10 years after the L.A. County Sheriff's Department took over. Residents with long memories are divided on the prospect.

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The final months of the Compton Police Department, defunct for a decade now, are a time that many city residents would rather forget.

Police were trying to push the mayor out; the mayor pushed the city's top cop out; and city officials were being heckled at council meetings. All the while, violent crime ravaged the community. Eight people were killed in the two weeks before the vote that brought in the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department to replace the troubled local police agency.

Now, 10 years later, top city officials are strongly considering resurrecting Compton's department.

In this predominantly black and Latino community, the shift is not motivated as much by dissatisfaction with the Sheriff's Department as by a more fundamental desire: ownership.

City leaders say local governance has matured. Reinstalling their own police force in place of the sprawling Sheriff's Department would return a sense of local pride absent since the local department was shuttered, officials say.

But many longtime residents who remember when the old Compton department patrolled their streets say that cutting ties with the Sheriff's Department would be misguided. Violent crime rates are down, and during surges in violence, the sheriff has pumped extra resources into the community, often at no extra cost.

Sheriff's officials have expressed confidence that once the city considers the costs and limitations of forming an independent police department, its leaders will decide against it.

Though council members have stopped short of fully endorsing a switch, most are echoing some version of the following: "It's always nice to have your own."

The Sheriff's Department provides the city with about 80 deputies for just under \$17 million annually, not including overtime and other costs. City officials project spending \$18 million during the first year of a new police department with about 90 officers. A further \$20 million has already been set aside to cover initial costs.

Sheriff's officials, and many Compton residents, are skeptical of claims that comparable services can be offered with similar or lower costs. A few dozen gang enforcement employees are provided to the city at no cost, department officials said. And the city has access to the

department's regional resources, including narcotics and homicide units and a fleet of helicopters.

But city Councilwoman Yvonne Arceneaux said she often hears nostalgia for the old Compton department in the tiny block meetings in her district.

"The Compton Police Department had a heart for the people because they were the people," she said. "You never get to know the officers now because they're constantly changing."

Sheriff Lee Baca declined to comment on the situation.

Arceneaux, a longtime resident, said she often finds herself longing for the intimate attention the local police force offered.

On a recent night, music blaring from a nearby party was keeping her up. She said that when she called the sheriff's station to complain, the officer there told her that many of the patrols that night had been sent out to address a need in a nearby city. The issue, she conceded, was minor, but a reminder that "you have more control over the services when it's your own."

Capt. Diane Walker, who oversees the sheriff's Compton station, said she feels insulted that the city is even considering cutting ties with her officers.

"These deputies come a long way to do a great job here," she said. Talk of replacing them is "very painful," she said. "It's like coming to your job and someone closes the door in your face."

In its final years, the old Compton department was seen as powerless to stop violence. Under the Sheriff's Department, violent crime, though still high, has decreased. There were 55 murders in 1999 compared with 37 last year.

Councilman Willie Jones downplayed credit accorded the Sheriff's Department in lowering violent crime, arguing that much of the improvement has come from business development in the area.

He said he complains often to sheriff's deputies about prostitution on Long Beach Boulevard, to no avail.

"There were a lot of problems" with the old Compton department, he said. "But there was a kind of pride. It was a source of employment. People looked forward to being a policeman in Compton."

For now, the city is holding town hall events to promote the plan to a skeptical public.

On a recent Thursday evening, dozens of residents filled a small assembly hall in Kelly Park, a recreation center where gang members are said to hassle people.

The words "responsibility," "accountability" and "respect" were projected on a slide.

"Right now we don't have those things," said Joseph Rouzan, a former Compton police chief hired by the city to research a potential switch back.

Officials were careful to distance a new agency from the old Compton department.

"We're not talking about bringing back *anyone*. We're not talking about going back to 1999 and saying y'all come back," Rouzan said.

Much of the crowd seemed unconvinced.

Longtime resident William Colvin, 75, said he felt terrorized by the old Compton department. He recalled seeing an older man being threatened with violence by an officer for parking his car partway in a red zone. He remembers another occasion when an officer swore at him because he was on his porch watching police swarm a car on his street.

"If they bring them back," he said, "I'm going to try to get out of Compton."