

Number of deputies unchanged since 1980; Sutter County may hire two additional officers

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The year was 1980, and 27 Sutter County sheriff's deputies patrolled the length and breadth of the county.

Today, 35 years and some 43,000 additional residents later, that same number of deputies patrols the county, although saying they cover "the length and breadth" might not be true.

Due to budget constraints in the county during the recession, there are six vacant deputy positions frozen in the books. The county can't afford to fill them, and the effects are starting to add up.

"I often hear the adage that we'll do more with less. That's not true. You do less with less," said Sheriff J. Paul Parker. "Everything will be impacted. Response times and the number of on-beat arrests goes down with less deputies."

Three deputies used to patrol the southern rural reaches of the county. Residents all knew their names, even calling them at home instead of ringing dispatch, Parker said.

Today, there are no deputies assigned to patrol the area.

In a January Appeal-Democrat report, Parker said the county's capacity for preventative patrol has greatly diminished, and the department now just responds from one call to the next.

Currently, deputies make up only 3 percent of the county's total number of employees.

"I thought law enforcement was always a priority for government," Parker said. "If you were to set up a whole new county, would you earmark 3 percent of your employees as patrol?"

At the county budget hearing for the 2015-16 fiscal year in late June, Parker appeared before the Board of Supervisors and asked that those six deputy positions and one lieutenant position be unfrozen and funded.

"I worked with 27 deputies out of the patrol office when I worked there in 1980," Parker said. "We had plenty then. I wouldn't call it plenty now."

The board directed county staff to try to find funds to hire two additional deputies, although there is no timeline for when that will occur.

"Our challenge is that our general fund budget just hasn't improved as quickly or robustly as everyone had hoped," said Shawne Corley, assistant county administrator. "Little by little, we had to keep removing positions from people's budgets because it kept getting worse, and it hasn't gotten better to add them back."

The county administrator's office said the same thing to Auditor-Controller Nate Black, who requested funding for an internal auditor position.

Requests to add a security position to the information technology department and a human resources manager were also rebuffed.

If Parker can take any consolation, it's that hiring two additional deputies now appears to be the board's main priority.

"I strongly believe that flood protection and public safety go hand in hand in this county," said Supervisor Jim Whiteaker. "New sheriff's deputies are a top priority for me to make sure our citizens are protected."

Supervisor Barbara LeVake also indicated during the budget hearing that public safety was her top priority.

But even if two new deputies are hired tomorrow, it will bring no immediate relief. Parker said it takes about a year for a deputy to be trained to the point that they are riding solo on beat patrol.

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