

EAST BAY TIMES

Contra Costa County stops short of giving sheriff's office millions for additional patrol

Sheriff will still receive \$1.8 million for body-worn cameras



The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors hear public comments at a meeting on Tuesday, October 12, 2021. (Screenshot)

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When voters in Contra Costa County [approved a new sales tax](#) in last year's election, they were promised a host of essential services in the ballot language: community health centers, better services for vulnerable populations and more money for emergency response.

The county largely made good on that promise Tuesday, allocating about \$104 million to an array of new programs centered around fire prevention, mental health and youth services, along with an expansion of the psychiatric emergency unit at the Martinez hospital.

But praise for initiatives made possible by the new sales tax, Measure X, took a back seat at Tuesday's meeting as the supervisors debated the community — and each other — over whether law enforcement should receive some of the new funding.

After a chorus of pushback, the supervisors fell short of approving \$6 million in tax revenue for additional Contra Costa Sheriff's Office patrol in unincorporated areas, though it did give the department \$2.5 million for new body-worn cameras.

After a 4-1 vote in favor of body cameras, the board's 3-2 vote for more sheriff patrol fell one short of the required threshold for Measure X allocations.

It was a partial victory for dozens of community members who said the sheriff should pay for more deputies and new equipment out of its own budget, which was projected to be about \$140 million before the current fiscal year.

A county-appointed board tasked with making Measure X funding recommendations had previously advised against giving the sheriff's office any money from this year's revenue, instead prioritizing public safety services that focused on mental health.

The board's recommendations prompted Supervisor John Gioia to vote no on both sheriff's office proposals, and Supervisor Federal Glover joined him in rejecting additional patrol.

"The advisory committee did a great job, and I want to honor and respect their recommendations as much as possible," Gioia said before the meeting.

This round of Measure X funding will last through June 2023, spanning the current fiscal year and the next one. The sales tax received approval from 58% of voters as a ballot measure in last year's election.

Together, the proposed sheriff's office allocations represented just 4.3% of the roughly \$205 million slated for distribution ahead of Tuesday's meeting.

But members of the Measure X community advisory board who called in said they felt betrayed by the proposed spending.

"Why aren't we in a position to look at root causes, and put more preventative, progressive approaches in place... and take away the need for largely uneducated-about-mental-health law enforcement to respond?" asked Gigi Crowder, an advisory board member and head of the National Alliance on Mental Illness' local chapter.



Gigi Crowder, the Executive Director and FaithNet Coordinator at National Alliance on Mental Illness, Contra Costa County talks to the Walnut Creek City Council about the officer involved shooting death of Miles Hall during a meeting in Walnut Creek, Calif., on Tuesday, July 16, 2019. Crowder was part of a large group urging for transparency in the investigation of the shooting. (Doug Duran/Bay Area News Group)

Crowder and others did praise the county for putting \$5 million in Measure X funds toward a [mental health crisis response hub](#), which will be named after Miles Hall, a Walnut Creek man [killed by police in 2019 while experiencing a mental break](#). Several callers said they would have been less vocal in supporting Measure X, or wouldn't have voted for the tax at all, had they known the supervisors were planning to give money to the sheriff's office.

"It's kind of hard not to feel a little insulted or offended when I hear — after all that work and, frankly, pulling teeth — that the 'buck stops here,' when we barely had the support to get this money to begin with," said Melvin Willis, a Richmond city councilman and member of the county's racial justice coalition.

Supervisor Karen Mitchoff strongly supported the sheriff's office funding, saying the term "emergency response" in the ballot language sufficiently accounted for law enforcement. She noted that residents had listed "public safety" as a high priority in a previous Measure X community needs assessment.

Mitchoff, who was once an employee in the county sheriff's office before running for office, accused opponents of the proposed allocations as harboring a "personal animus" toward current Sheriff David Livingston.

“People seem to think the sheriff gets everything he asks for,” Mitchoff said. “That is not true; he has asked for body cams for the last several years and we didn’t fund them.”

Supervisor Diane Burgis agreed, saying that the county’s unincorporated areas, which comprise much of her district, are in need of more law enforcement presence.

“We aren’t giving money to the sheriff, it’s giving law enforcement protection to vulnerable communities,” Burgis said.

Many who called in to Tuesday’s meeting, including advisory board members, countered that the tax — which accounts for a half-percent charge on sales transactions — is simply not meant to pay for more law enforcement tools or personnel.

“I expected that you would more strongly lean into our recommendations and be more transparent about your decision-making,” said B.K. Williams, an advisory board member who said she and others were blindsided by the sheriff’s office proposal.

Opponents also cited the county’s resolution last year to [declare racism a public health crisis](#), saying the proposed allocation disregarded an often fraught relationship between law enforcement and communities of color.

“As a Black woman, having faced the George Floyd murder and the additional injustices toward people of color that surfaced during the COVID pandemic, I find that unconscionable,” Williams added.

In an interview, Gioia said the county will schedule meetings between the Board of Supervisors and Measure X stakeholders so both sides are on the same page about revenue allocation.

In addition to rejecting one of the sheriff’s proposals, the supervisors postponed decisions for three planned expansions at the Martinez hospital: new office buildings, a larger parking structure and a new public health lab.

The board will return to these projects at a later date to receive more information.

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