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Crime vexes bankrupt San Bernardino



San Bernardino Civic Plaza. Struggling after the 2008 economic crash, the city filed for bankruptcy on August 1, 2012.
- Russell Calkins

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by David Weinberg
Marketplace for Thursday, October 4, 2012

STORY



Russell Calkins
Hans Van der tow spoke at the SBC Town Hall meeting. His message: The city needs less criminals and more tax paying citizens.

It's Friday night, and I'm riding shotgun with Sergeant David Carlson of the San Bernardino police department.

He's checking the IDs of four teenaged girls who were pulled over for driving with their lights off when we hear the "pop, pop, pop" of gun shots a few blocks away.

When we arrive at the house where the shots were fired, our headlights illuminate an upside-down plastic storage container and clothing scattered across the front lawn. The front door is open and an officer looks down at a drop of blood on the floor.

A woman and her two children stand in the driveway, visibly shaken. The woman holds her 12-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son tight against her chest while the

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Russel Calkins

Draymond Crawford is head of graffiti clean up in San Bernardino. He has been trying to convince City Hall to install parking meters to generate new revenue

San Bernardino struggles after bankruptcy

Hans Van Der Touw, a San Bernardino resident for the last 13 years, grew up in Holland and quotes a phrase from his native country when discussing the crime problem.

“We say weak doctors make stinking wounds,” he tells me. “In other words, if you don’t attack it, head on the wound is going to rot even more.”

Van Der Touw runs an export business in San Bernardino. He’s a regular at City Council meetings and he gives talks to local community groups often bringing big homemade charts and graphs. He believes public safety should be the city’s number one priority.

“I would close down anything not essential in order to get police, get boots on ground,” he says. “If it means close all parks, if it means close all the swimming pools, I’m sorry.”

Van Der Touw says that once crime is under control the middle class will return, and in turn stabilize the city’s tax revenue.

Tim Prince disagrees. He is the founder of a group called Citizens for Accountable city government, one of several local groups that argue the fire and police officials are overpaid.

“There’s no doubt about it,” Prince says. “Seventy-three percent of the city budget goes to police and fire union benefit.”

The actual percentage is 78, at least until this week – when the city council approved a \$2.9 million cut in fire department funding. Some on the city council say the cuts don’t go deep enough.

The average salary for a San Bernardino police officer is \$95,000. For firefighters it’s about \$145,000. Under a city charter, those salaries are linked to public safety salaries in 10 similar-sized cities across the state. Those cities are much wealthier than San Bernardino.

Neither the fire union nor the police union would grant an interview for this story. In the past, they have said that San Bernardino has to maintain competitive salaries with wealthier cities if it wants to attract quality employees.

“I’m a big supporter of public safety,” says San Bernardino city worker Draymond Crawford. “But I understand like anyone else you need to know what you can pay for.”

Crawford is in charge of graffiti cleanup in San Bernardino, but he used to work as a police officer in Long Beach when that city was going through a similar economic downturn.

“They cut their public safety down to a bare minimum,” he says. “There was no pay raises and Long Beach had a reputation for being the Wild West.”

officers search the inside of the house.

Sergeant Carlson tries to comfort the kids.

“All right sweeties,” he says. “I know this was really scary, but just take a deep breath, we’re here now. You gotta take care of your sister, OK?”

A police helicopter whirs overhead and despite its help, officers are unable to find either the shooter or the victim from the shooting last week.

It was a slow night, Carlson says, compared to most Fridays in San Bernardino, one of the most dangerous cities in California.

According to 2010 data, the violent crime rate is twice that of the rest of California. San Bernardino has declared bankruptcy, and it’s struggling to figure out how to make the budget cuts it needs to get back on track.

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Crawford says that one of the lessons he learned from watching Long Beach's economic recovery was how the city found ways to generate revenue. One of the simplest solutions -- which he has tried for years to get San Bernardino to do -- is to install parking meters downtown.

Crawford admits that parking meters alone won't solve all the city's problems but says different revenue streams might have helped the city stave off bankruptcy. Now, he says, it seems the city is forgoing small solutions in the hope that one silver bullet can fix its problems.

Next week in Marketplace's series on San Bernardino, a check on how the city government is responding to the giant task of emerging from bankruptcy.

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cwals99@yahoo.com · Oct 8, 2012

What should vex citizens of San Bernardino is why is a city in California going bankrupt when the state was ground zero for the housing fraud and as such still have perhaps tens of billions coming back to California? With financial analysts all agreeing that the massive mortgage fraud would be settled with a \$600-800 billion settlement, the Attorney General of California, who by the way pretended to go hard for the citizens of California, still owes the California communities tens of billions after only a \$25 billion settlement. So, San Bernardino doesn't have a budget crisis, it has a crisis of justice. The people need to work on politicians who get that.

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firecap · Oct 4, 2012

David

The SB city firefighters base pay is 85,000 a year. there salary and benefits are posted on the city web site.

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Msgeo · Oct 4, 2012

San Bernardino has had crime and gang issues for many years. I came to SB to work on contaminated groundwater many times during the 1990's and we used to joke that you had to have bullet proof vest training for the job. Hearing gun shots was not unusual at that time. Gangs, meth houses and hookers were common day and night.

Sometime in the late 90's the city started code enforcement on some of the slumlord owned housing. They would bring the houses up to code and sell them to families at very low or no interest. It was amazing to see the difference in the neighborhoods. Sounds like that program did not continue.

I still have a t-shirt that was put out as a fundraiser by the police department that says "San Bernardino 187 Champions"; 187 is civil code for murder. on the back it has two vultures sitting on the "Welcome to San Bernardino" sign with "The All-American City" crossed out the "The Murder City" written in followed by a long list of decreasing population numbers.

The surprise is not that SB has gone bankrupt, the surprise is that it didn't happen much sooner. This is a

very sad city with generationally imbedded problems.

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