Consider some recent FBI numbers: Violent crime in 2015 rose by 18 percent in the unincorporated swaths of Riverside County, compared with 2014. Property crime climbed by 14 percent. And vehicle theft surged by 42 percent.

Residents’ calls for service have spiked, and average response times have dipped.

These trends – driven partly by California policies that shifted some state inmates to county jails (AB 109) and reduced some felonies to misdemeanors (Prop. 47) – are not unique to this region. But in Riverside County, where costs now exceed tax receipts, the challenge to fund adequate law enforcement will continue.

To prevent the county from losing more ground to criminals, the Sheriff’s Department proposes a status quo budget, starting July 1. The idea is to keep the same number of cops on the street as last year. To do that, the county will need to invest 10 percent more in sheriff’s operations than it spent in 2015. Or, put another way: We need an additional $30.4 million for exactly what we have now.

Why the price jump? The impact of wage increases from labor agreements still in effect, mainly. In recent years, pay raises were given to employees in departments countywide. Not only does every sheriff’s deputy cost more with each wage increase, but the higher costs of personnel in other departments affect the sheriff’s budget through the Internal Service Fund. This fund provides centralized services on a cost-reimbursement basis to other county departments – which is, in essence, the county charging itself.

In all, payroll now absorbs 90 percent of the sheriff’s budget. And to curb those costs, the department can do only one thing: cut deputy patrols in unincorporated areas, either actively or through attrition. As it is, deputies are stretched lean over 7,300 square miles countywide.
The department can’t trim patrols in cities that contract with the sheriff, because these partners, also pinched by labor agreements, pay their own way for specific service levels. The sheriff is likewise required by California and the courts to maintain required staffing in jails and courtrooms.

Elsewhere in the sheriff’s budget, there is little left to purge. Remember, the department controls less than 10 percent of the operational budget, given labor contracts that set personnel costs. The sheriff’s office will continue seeking efficiencies wherever possible – and work with consultant KPMG and the County Executive Office on further whittling expenses.

But visions of quick fixes should be tempered. First, the department has been implementing efficiencies since 2007 when the sheriff took office. The easy adjustments – along with some hard ones – were made long ago. And second, the efficiencies suggested by KPMG, including enhancing the department’s communications systems, require large upfront investments by the county in order to reap longer-term savings. For now, county government has no money for such worthy projects.

The sheriff’s office does defray costs through revenue sources such as grants, state funding for realignment, jail booking fees and proceeds from asset forfeiture. Thanks to these offsets, the sheriff has asked the county for just $303 million of the $714 million required to run the Sheriff’s Department next year.

Meanwhile, some new costs dot the horizon.

One pending issue is the need, in future years, to boost patrols in unincorporated areas. When the county put more deputies on the street starting in 2009, crime rates plummeted and response times were shortened. A few years later, when the county pared patrols to save money, crime snapped back to higher levels.

Now, not only are crime rates rising, but county residents routinely request more visible patrols in their communities. The department’s plan is to phase in the hiring of 14 to 15 new officers to bolster this protection countywide, at an eventual cost of $2 million annually.

Another price tag in the pipeline: the cost of staffing a new jail in Indio. The 1,626-bed East County Detention Center, which will replace an aging 353-bed facility, is slated for completion in 2018. Operating just one phase of the jail will require at least 45 new positions, at a cost of $4 million per year. And Riverside
County, whose jail crowding forces the early release of 600 inmates per month, has an acute need for more beds.

While these costs do not affect today’s spending plan, they bear close consideration. In fiscal year 2016, the department will pursue a status quo budget, work with KPMG toward savings on the margins, and embrace county efforts to control expenses wherever feasible. On the budget, the bottom line is this: Going forward, the more the county can save on labor costs, the stronger deputy patrols will become, the more jail space will hold criminals – and the safer the public will be.

Stan Sniff is the sheriff of Riverside County.

PE

http://www.pe.com/articles/county-806859-sheriff-department.html