

Peter suggests we read this: see what happened when modest and reasonable steps were enacted in a city that already has a successful program of specially-trained paramedics

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [George Floyd killing, Police](#) August 22, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts about the Bethlehem Police* 

*Good conversation builds community.
The Gadfly*

Gadfly:

Much has already been written on this blog about both the quality of BPD as well as the known problems. Increased attention to anti-racist, less-violent, and non-punitive approaches will cost money. Unless we are suggesting a tax increase, shouldn't funds for these improvements come from reductions in spending for the approaches that need to be changed.

Blowback from the so-called "defunding" proposals is to be expected, especially from those who have not encountered the problems or have other reasons for supporting the police no matter what. Read the following to see what happened when a series of what seem to be modest and reasonable steps were enacted in a city that already has a successful program of specially-trained paramedics to respond to mental-health-related situations.

Peter Crownfield

from Meena Venkataramanan, "Austin City Council votes to cut police department budget by one-third, mainly through reorganizing some duties out from law enforcement oversight." Texas Tribune, August 13, 2020.

The Austin City Council unanimously voted to cut its police department budget by \$150 million on Thursday, after officers and the city's top cop faced months of criticism over the killing of an unarmed Black and Hispanic man, the use of force against anti-police brutality protesters

and the investigation of a demonstrator's fatal shooting by another citizen.

Those criticisms coincided with protests across Texas and the country calling for reforms on police tactics and the "defunding" of law enforcement in favor of redistributing funds to social services and alternative public safety programs. The council's move makes Austin the first of Texas' four biggest cities to drastically cut police department funding. The share of the police department budget that was cut is among the largest percentage decreases in the nation this year.

These immediate cuts would include eliminating funding from three planned police cadet classes and reallocating funds to areas like violence prevention, food access and abortion access programs.

Another \$80 million in police budget cuts would come from a yearlong process that will redistribute civilian functions like forensic sciences, support services and victims' services out from under the police department and into other parts of city government. About \$50 million would come from reallocating dollars to a "Reimagine Safety Fund" that would divert money toward "alternative forms of public safety and community support through the yearlong reimagining process."

The council's proposal also includes eliminating 150 vacant officer positions, so that the police department will begin fiscal year 2021 without any unfilled sworn positions.

Gov. Greg Abbott said Thursday that the council's actions represent the triumph of political agendas over public safety, and vowed that the Texas Department of Public Safety will "stand in the gap" to protect Austin until the state Legislature can take up the issue next session.

"Austin's decision puts the brave men and women of the Austin Police Department and their families at greater risk, and paves the way for lawlessness," he said in a statement. "Public safety is job one, and Austin has abandoned that duty."

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton said the Austin City Council's decision to reduce the police department budget was a "political

haymaker driven by the pressures of cancel culture” as Austin continues to combat violent crime.

“Unfortunately, the targets of this ‘cancelling’ are the brave men and women who selflessly put their lives on the line to keep our families safe,” he said in a statement. “The city council’s action to slash funding disregards the safety of our capital city, its citizens, and the many guests who frequent it.”

The Austin Police Association tweeted its opposition to the council’s plan.

“The council’s budget proposals continue to become more ridiculous and unsafe for Austinites,” the group tweeted. “They are going to ignore the majority who do not want the police defunded.”

The Austin City Council spent hours Wednesday listening to more than 200 speakers voice their opinions about cutting the police budget during its public comment period.

Sarah Hay, a District 10 resident, called in to express support for council member Greg Casar’s “Reimagine Public Safety” fund.

“Specifically, we support reimagining traffic safety and enforcement within this proposal,” she said. “We can easily divest over \$18 million from traffic enforcement when most of these functions can be administered by unarmed civilians and is not required to be police work.”

But others said the council’s proposed plan to reduce the budget was not enough.

Two members of Undoing White Supremacy Austin, a local group that seeks to promote racial justice, read a testimony from Alicia Torres Don, an Austin resident who said she is concerned that the money from the police budget will not be redistributed quickly enough under the council’s plan.

City councils around the country have been voting to cut police department budgets, including Los Angeles, which voted to cut \$150

million from its proposed \$1.86 billion budget, and New York City, which slashed \$1 billion from its nearly \$6 billion budget. Portland's mayor and school board said they would discontinue the presence of armed officers from local schools and reallocate the \$1 million designated for these officers into the community.

from Jordan Smith, "Austin Police Budget Cuts Prompt Threats From State Officials" | The Intercept, August 19, 2020.

"Reimagining public safety' does not mean simply reorganizing departments or taking the same functions that APD currently performs and moving them, complete with their current staff and culture, to a civilian department," the groups said in a joint statement. "When we say 'reimagine public safety,' it's a step beyond defunding the police. It means imagining a world where we don't rely on cops, cages, and other punitive approaches to keep us safe."

Moore understands the frustration, but he believes Austin has taken a powerful step toward that future. "Either we ask for the big thing and we don't get nothing and then we're stuck in the same place, or we can start chomping away at the elephant one bite at a time," he said. "I think we took a pretty good chunk out when council took the vote last week."

Meanwhile, on the other end of the spectrum, state officials and other lawmakers from outside Austin were quick to decry the cuts and pledge legislative action against such "short-sighted efforts," as a Dallas-area state senator put it. Gov. Greg Abbott pledged to have state police "stand in the gap" to protect the city, while George P. Bush, the elected state land commissioner, took to Twitter. He posted a video of a row of cars with broken windows in a parking garage downtown and implied that the vandalism had taken place the same night as the city council's vote. "The need for police funding is as clear as ever," he wrote. "This is a dangerous path to go down."

The grandstanding was little more than transparent fearmongering. The city hasn't cut any current positions, so there's really no "gap" to stand in. Besides, the state police already play a big role in Austin, where they have jurisdiction over state property — including parking garages like the one where the vandalism Bush was decrying took place. State police said

the vandalism actually happened on August 8, four days before the council vote, and was discovered during a routine patrol.

Moore is also ready to push forward. “I just hope we can try to break the barriers of everything that has been socialized within us so we can truly allow ourselves to imagine and get creative with things outside of boxes, outside of what the norm is, so we can come up with something pretty groovy,” he said. He notes that major shifts in U.S. history have been rife with uncertainty: abolishing slavery, women’s suffrage, desegregation. “We always had these assumptions that the most terrible thing was going to happen if we stopped doing the status quo,” he said. “Yes, there’s still oppression and people are still fighting ... but because we’ve taken these big steps in history, it’s only made us better.”

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