

## **Ash, Keller: Measure B won't solve San Jose's public safety problems**

In a rare alignment of San Jose political planets, organized labor, the Chamber of Commerce and a majority of City Council members advocate raising the sales tax by one-quarter percent, identified as Measure B on the June ballot. They propose funneling the estimated \$40 million of increased tax revenue into the general fund. Supporters of the measure contend that the funds are necessary for improving public safety. We disagree.

We share the proponents' concern about the number of police on our streets and our city's inability to hit its response time targets. We dispute their assertion that improving public safety requires digging deeper into taxpayer pockets. The measure asks that voters pay again for something we are already funding.

This year's police budget increased by \$23 million over last year's actual spending. That increase means we could hire an additional 170 police officers and 26 community service officers, as well as more staffing for the Crime Prevention Program, the Crime Analysis Unit and the Gang Investigations Unit. San Jose does not lack the funding to provide the safe neighborhoods we deserve. It lacks the personnel.

The San Jose Police Department has consistently failed to hire more officers than leave through retirement and resignation. This situation prompted a recent analysis by the city auditor resulting in 14 recommendations for improving police recruiting efforts to reverse the police force decline. They range from rebuilding the department morale to increasing civilian staffing in the recruiting unit. We heartily support these recommendations.

Improving public safety is not primarily a funding issue. The city has aggressively increased police and fire spending for the past several years; from \$438 million in 2013 to a budgeted \$525 million in 2016. Mayor Sam Liccardo laments years of belt tightening, yet San Jose has significantly increased public safety funding and continues supporting the deficits generated by noncore services such as performing arts venues and hotels.

Why the urgency for higher sales taxes if we are already increasing public safety spending? Well, San Jose's rate is approaching the 10 percent California state

maximum. Our current sales tax is 8.75 percent. The proposed .5 percent VTA tax for BART and other transportation projects on the November ballot would increase it to 9.25 percent. Some believe that if we don't act now, the 2018 election may be too late. Recent polls show that voters (weary of repeated stories of mail theft, burglary and other property crimes) appear agreeable to the proposed tax if it's pitched as being used primarily for public safety.

We have additional concerns about the measure. First, we trust this council to keep its word, but, there's no guarantee that future councils will honor those promises. There is nothing in the ordinance to prevent future councils from spending the money on whatever pet projects they want. Second, the sales tax is regressive; it hits hardest those who can least afford it.

Our police department certainly needs more officers on the street. A higher sales tax will not make that happen. Don't be scared into thinking it will.

Craig Ash is secretary and Doug Keller is a member of Citizens for Fiscal Responsibility. They wrote this for the Mercury News.