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City police courting business community for cash to fight crime

Baltimore Business Journal - by Heather Harlan Warnack Staff

Some of the city's top leaders are expected to ask the **Greater Baltimore Committee** for as much as \$500,000 to combat the violent crime that is threatening economic development efforts.

Baltimore City Health Commissioner Joshua Sharfstein and city Police Commissioner Frederick Bealefeld are slated to appear before the GBC's board in January to make a pitch, said Donald C. Fry, GBC president.

Sharfstein appeared before the GBC President's Advisory Council on Dec. 18 to discuss Operation Safe Streets, a program aimed at reducing shootings and homicides in the city. Baltimore recorded 275 homicides for the year as of Dec. 19 -- and has what is considered one of the highest homicide rates per capita in the nation.

Based on the "CeaseFire" model in Chicago, the Operation Safe Streets program uses outreach workers, faith leaders and other community residents to intervene in conflicts and promote alternatives to violence. Sometimes, the mediators are ex-offenders with knowledge of the consequences.

During Sharfstein's presentation, he passed out materials showing that the program is in need of \$1 million from the private sector to guarantee its expansion.

GBC is willing to help, but at what level remains a question, Fry said. Also up for debate is the exact program that GBC decides to support.

"We would certainly consider any request that Commissioner Bealefeld asks of me," Fry said.

GBC has a history of raising private-sector funds for the city police department. In 1999, the business organization gave \$500,000 to reduce homicides in the city.

But there were not as many competing interests at that time. Baltimore business leaders are being leaned on heavily at the local and state levels to assist with what are typically government endeavors backed by taxpayer dollars.

As the Baltimore police force is turning to the corporate community, Mayor Sheila Dixon is seeking some backing for her "Cleaner, Greener" initiative, business leaders said this week.

Meanwhile, Baltimore schools chief Andres Alonso is pursuing private foundations for \$25 million to revive reform efforts and state officials are chasing investors for a \$120 million dredging project at Seagirt Marine Terminal.

"I don't think it should always be the business leaders to be the go-to guys for the bottomless pit of money," said Matthew Doud, president of **Planit**, an advertising agency based in downtown Baltimore. "You can only go to the well so many times before people just say 'forget it.'"

At the same time, Doud said Baltimore businesses and residents can play a role.

William W. Carrier III, managing partner for Tydings & Rosenberg LLP, said his downtown law firm typically supports "the things that affect us the most. Violence in the downtown area affects us most."

As a result, Carrier said his firm would be willing to donate to programs that fight crime. Last year, one of the firm's receptionists was killed on her way home from work. When she stepped off the bus in her Overlea neighborhood, she was shot, Carrier said.

In a less severe incident, one of Carrier's partners had her pocketbook stolen outside of the firm's headquarters at 100 E. Pratt St.

"It has gotten to be a real problem," Carrier said of the city's crime. "If it continues to get worse, I suspect companies will leave the city."

Kirby Fowler, president of **Downtown Partnership of Baltimore Inc.**, said the existence of his organization that represents downtown businesses is proof of public and private collaboration.

"The business community has a strong history of philanthropy and stepping up to help the public sector solve its problems," he said. "While there are limits, there's a sense that we're all in this together."

Often, it is in challenging times when business and government can forge creative solutions and partnerships, Fowler said.

Police commissioner Bealefeld said the business community can be a strong partner in reducing violent crime.

Cash contributions are needed to keep programs, including Operation Safe Streets, viable, Bealefeld said. He also suggested that advertising executives could support the police department by volunteering their employees to devise a campaign aimed at recruiting officers.

Accounting help is also needed to find solutions to the "overtime situation," he said. The Police Department exceeded its overtime budget in fiscal year 2006 by millions of dollars, igniting criticism from elected officials and the public.