



Cops line the walls at the standing room only city council meeting last week.

Photos by Todd Luck

Police officers make direct appeal to City Council

BY TODD LUCK
THE CHRONICLE

Officers with the Winston-Salem Police Department filled the room during the City Council meeting on Nov. 16 to bring attention to the effect relatively low pay is having on officer retention.

Dozens of uniformed officers stood along the sides of the City Council chamber as other WSPD officers, employees and supporters filled many of the seats in the standing room only meeting. Lt. Danny Watts and Corp. Jamison Keltner both spoke during the monthly public comment period about police pay.

The city staff has been looking into both police and fire department pay for the past six weeks. The findings will be presented to the Public Safety Committee in its Dec. 14 meeting. City staff is also looking into the possibility of raising the city's minimum wage to \$15 over a number of years.

Watts heads WSPD's recruiting unit. He's been with the unit for 14 years, recruiting more than 500 officers. He said that it's becoming harder to keep experienced officers. During his remarks, he said WSPD is the lowest paid police department in a major city in the state and pays less than many smaller departments including the Kernersville Police Department, which WSPD has lost five officers to in the last few years. The department has lost 75 experienced offi-

cers to other departments since 2012.

"We're losing officers to other police departments at an alarming rate," Watts told the City Council.

He continued, saying WSPD is having to replace veterans with inexperienced officers. Studies have shown that makes them more likely to be involved in an excessive use of force complaint or a traffic accident. He said the department is currently using overtime to make sure adequate staffing levels are met.

City Manager Lee Garrity told the council that the initial findings in the report being prepared for the Public Safety Committee found firefighters and police pay is about 10 percent below other Triad cities and counties.

"We're behind the Triad," he said. "We're behind Kernersville, High Point, Greensboro, Forsyth County, Gullfued. All of them."

Watts told The Chronicle that having lower pay compared to other police departments has made recruiting qualified candidates more challenging. He brought his concern to Chief Barry Rountree who has been working with the city to address the

issue. Rountree himself was present at the meeting, showing his support for his officers.

Watts said that some in the WSPD are working as off-duty officers, providing security for events or local businesses in order to support their family.

"I can tell you that the large majority are out there because they need the money," said Watts on officers who work security detail. "Because they have families at home and they're just not making enough money here to support their family, to get the basic needs met a lot of times."

David Pollard, president of the Winston-Salem Professional Fire Fighters Association, said the Winston-Salem Fire Department experiences similar issues with low pay and firefighters leaving for other fire departments or other professions that pay more. He said that's one of the factors, along with work-related injuries common to the profession, that's causing the department to use overtime to make up for being short staffed. He said replacing a firefighter takes months since they have to go through training. He said it was very common for firefighters to take part-time jobs at other fire departments or other side jobs to make ends meet.

"You have no choice but to work a side job if you want to put food on the table or a roof over your head," said Pollard, who's been a firefighter for 20 years. "Nobody's going to make it on a firefighter's salary." City Council Member James Taylor,

who chairs the Public Safety Committee, said that the council has been aware of the problem. The police and fire have been receiving small raises over the past three years, but it hasn't been enough to keep pace with other departments. He said officers are being trained by the WSPD or WSFD and then being recruited by other departments elsewhere in the state.

"What we're becoming is a training ground for police women and men and fire men and women, and what we're doing is training them and they're taking the training to other cities," said Taylor.

Taylor, and the other city council members said it was an issue they were taking seriously and they will be looking for ways to act on in the next budget.

Pay below what other cities offer is not a situation unique to public safety officers. According to City Human Resources Director Carmen Caruth, a 2014 analysis found that 80 percent of positions in the city paid less than similar jobs in other markets in the state. The city has an overall turnover rate of about 9 percent for employees leaving for any reason, which includes taking another job, retirement and termination.

Taylor successfully pushed for the city's minimum wage to be raised to \$10.10 last year. He said he didn't object to a higher minimum wage, but didn't want it to result in services being cut or taxes being raised.



Watts

Autos burglarized while church-goers worship

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

The Winston-Salem Police Department reports that on Nov. 15, the Winston-Salem Police Department responded to reports of auto break-ins at three separate churches within a period of three hours: 1st Calvary Baptist, 101 N. Dunleith Ave.; Zion Memorial Baptist, 998 E. Fourth St.; and Diggs Memorial United Holy Church, 125 N. Graham Ave.

The break-ins occurred while church services were taking place. The thieves targeted both locked and unlocked vehicles, taking anything deemed to be of value. There are no suspects at this time and it is

unknown if the break-ins are connected, the police said.

As the holiday season approaches, many religious organizations will be sponsoring events outside of what would be considered normal operating hours. "Please be vigilant to suspicious persons and activity. The Winston-Salem Police Department strongly encourages residents to always lock their vehicles and to secure valuables in the trunk of the vehicle whenever possible," police said in a statement.

Please report any suspicious persons or activities to the Winston-Salem Police Department at 336-773-7700.

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statewide effort is currently underway to make sure that adequate campaign war chests are in place to unseat each Republican incumbent.

Since many African-Americans have now been redistricted to majority black voting districts, Sen. Blue asked that they use their influence outside of their districts to help elect the eight Democrats needed. "I don't care what color they are ... you can tell them that the future of their kids and grandkids depends on what they're willing to do."

"It doesn't matter who the governor is [if we don't have] some real direction where the state is going if we don't change the General Assembly," Blue insisted. "If we pick up four or five more [Democratic] senators, we will have an affect on what direction this state is going in. If we pick up our eight or nine, we will have control."

The challenge for Democrats to retake the state House is no less daunting, said House Minority Leader Larry Hall (D-Durham). There are currently 45 Democrats in the house, compared to the 74-member Republican majority, so compared to the state Senate, the ground that must be made up to regain Democratic control is considerable. And given how the districts are drawn to protect Republican seats, it's not likely Democrats will take 30 seats or more in the 2016 elections, observers say.

But Rep. Hall told AAC-NCDP members from across the state that even a few House gains can give Democrats more influence on what shape future public pol-

icy takes.

"We work, we win," Hall had the audience repeat after him. "Don't let anybody tell you there is no hope." The Minority Leader reminded them that of all of the Republican-dominated state legislatures across the nation, the NC House was the only one in 2014 to pick up Democratic seats, in this case three.

"So we know what the formula is. We've got to pick up at least four more seats," he said.

Rep. Hall stressed the importance of working at the precinct and county levels to strengthen local organizing to get out the vote. But he also made clear that House Democrats were committed to do their part to help " ... move North Carolina forward."

"You've seen what's been happening in the headlines. It's much worse than you know, the graft and corruption happening in our General Assembly through our [Republican] leadership there ..." Hall charged, adding that he believed that wrongdoing was also taking place in Gov. McCrory's office as well.

"It's beyond belief, it's disrespectful to the people of North Carolina, and we will not stand for it," Hall declared, noting that the FBI was already investigating allegations that the governor unduly influenced the extension of a contract a donor had with the prison system. McCrory has denied this.

"We're going to continue to stand and make sure that North Carolinians get a fair shake from their leadership," Rep. Hall vowed. "But everybody in your household should be registered to vote."

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November 6 - December 7



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