

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Lily Haight with local news for August 26, 2020.

The City Council's committee on public safety and law enforcement met for the second time on August 24 to discuss the police department's budget.

This comes as a wave of new anti-police protests have taken place across the country, after Jacob Blake, a 29-year-old Black man from Wisconsin, was shot several times at close range by police. Blake survived the attack, but family members have reported he is now paralyzed from the waist down.

The shooting that took place in Kenosha, Wisconsin, reignited calls for law enforcement reform across the country and the reallocation of police funds to social services, such as education and mental health services.

In Port Townsend, city council members created a committee on public safety and law enforcement this June, after the death of George Floyd, a Black man from Minneapolis, to determine what budgetary and policy changes can be made to increase public safety.

Interim police chief Troy Surber presented to city council members the 2020 police budget.

This year, the total police budget was \$3.8 million, which is 37% of the city's general fund budget. Sixty-nine percent of the police budget covers personnel expenses, which includes salaries, overtime, benefits, uniforms and payroll taxes. The department employs 15 police officers, which Surber noted is below the state and national average of officers per population.

Thirty-one percent of the police department's budget is used for non-personnel expenses, including contracts with JeffComm dispatch services, the jail services, as well as vehicle and I.T. maintenance and purchases.

Each commissioned officer in the department is issued five weapons, including two firearms – a 9 mm pistol and a patrol rifle – and three “less-lethal” options, including a TASER, a canister of pepper spray, and an extendable baton. All of these weapons are specified as “issued equipment” in the Collective Bargaining Agreement, therefore any effort to alter the standard issue weapons will need to be bargained with the police union.

One of the goals of Black Lives Matter of Jefferson County, a group organizing to end police brutality and lift up the Black, Indigenous and People of Color in Jefferson County, is to disarm the police, remove police officers from schools and to reduce the size of the police force.

City council members also discussed the number of mental health calls that the police department deals with, as well as a few other issues, such as complaints filed against the police department.

From 2017 to 2019, there were 8 complaints filed against the department. All were investigated internally, and determined to be “unfounded” complaints. Former city council member Bob Gray brought up this issue during the public comment period of the meeting.

“Is it logical that complainants were always wrong, and the police were always right?” he asked. “Having the police department review its own complaints is an obvious conflict,” he added.

City council members asked questions, but did not offer much commentary on the budget presentation from Surber. At the next meeting, on September 28, committee members plan to discuss alternatives to traditional

policing. They will hear from the police department's navigator, Jud Haynes, who helps find resources for people who interact with the police but may struggle with homelessness and mental health issues.

Mayor Michelle Sandoval noted that she also hopes to hear concerns and ideas from Black, Indigenous and People of Color community members throughout the process.

"I want to be respectful of all the various parties," she said. "Those that are on the job, and those that are in our community."

Public access to Lake Cushman and the Staircase entrance of the Olympic National Park is now closed after increased visitation to the area created an unsafe environment for visitors and forest service staff.

The National Forest Service announced last week that two roads, Road 24 and Road 2451, which provide access to Lake Cushman will close because overcrowding not only prevented emergency response vehicles from responding to requests for help, but also led to natural resource damage along the road.

District Ranger Yewah Lau said the extreme numbers of people recreating at the lake created unsafe conditions and a traffic gridlock. The area will be closed until the weather cools and visitation returns to a manageable level.

According to the press release, overcrowding of outdoor recreation sites like Lake Cushman is not unusual right now. Many public areas have experienced highly increased visitation leading to overcrowding, overparking, excessive trash, and scattered human waste this summer. This comes during a time of limited Forest Service staffing, because of COVID-19, to keep up with cleaning and trash pick-up.

And that's it for today's local news. KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon Monday through Saturday and at 5pm Monday through Thursday. You can contact us through news@kptz.org. I'm Lily Haight. Thanks for listening.