

April 9, 2010

**Report to the Mayor and the City Council
City of Austin**

Your Public Safety Commission met Monday, April 5 at 6:00 p.m. in the Boards and Commissions meeting room. We had a single item agenda and reports from Chief Carter and Chief Ells on the ARIC and blood draws.

We passed one motion to support the contract with the county for the services of a phlebotomist at the Travis County Jail with a vote of 4 in favor and 2 abstaining as will be reflected later in the month from the minutes. One Commission member was ill and not in attendance.

Most of our meeting time was focused upon testimony provided by and questions to experts involved with the transport of illegal drugs and other contraband into and through Austin and current evidence as well as future likelihood of cartel associated violence. Such violence has begun to appear in several Texas border cities including El Paso and Laredo. Testimony from our experts included an observation that cartels were seeking to establish Austin as both a “command and control center” and as a “staging area” for moving drug shipments to other areas of the United States.

I concluded from the questions and discussion that we enjoy a remarkable degree of trust and cooperation among the cognizant Federal agencies, the DEA and the FBI, the Texas DPS and our Austin Police Department. That is an important line of defense. Of equivalent importance are an informed public and the willingness of neighbors, teachers, ministers, parents and the like to work to effect a reduction in the demand for drugs and counter notions of romanticism of the use and transport of drugs. I think our efforts at the Commission assist in that purpose. Important as well is the deployment of officers in a variety of educational and community building tasks in neighborhoods, schools and working with various businesses and community organizations.

We do not have enough data from this meeting to determine if we will experience the level of violence potential that El Paso faces or the numbers of Mexican citizens now fleeing into El Paso from chaos in Mexico. The situation changes rapidly and the cartel alliances are fluid. The amount of money is immense with some current estimates that dollars involved to Mexico are greater than the sum of earnings of Mexicans working in the United States and sending money back to Mexico. The cartels are large powerful businesses accustomed and well-prepared to use violence against competitors and law enforcement. El Paso where one might expect there to be greater vigilance seems to have been caught somewhat aware of the rapidity of the growth of such violence as in December their police chief was forced to ask their city council for the authority to equip all officers with military grade rifles. One must also conclude that neither did Mexico, itself, anticipate how powerful the cartel actions would become.

It is important that Austin not be oblivious to such potential threats. Before the summer is gone we should have greater clarity about these matters and how well prepared we are to deal with these issues in Austin. Certainly Chief Acevedo’s declaration in January that APD needed an additional 500 officers gives me concern if these cartel-related threats grow.

Michael Lauderdale

Chair Public Safety Commission