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Without Ticket Revenues, St. Louis Area Having Trouble Funding Police.

The aftermath of racial turmoil in Ferguson, Mo., is exacting a toll on St. Louis-area communities that built their finances around speeding tickets, thanks to a state law limiting the income they can draw from traffic fines.

The city council of Charlack last week decided the community of 1,400 can't afford an eight-officer police force under the new law, which says traffic citations in St. Louis County municipalities can't exceed 12.5 percent of annual operating revenue, down from 30 percent. Policing in Charlack and in nearby Wellston, which dissolved its 23-officer force in May, is now handled by a recently created cooperative of local departments.

The 2014 police shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson forced a national re-examination of what critics call "taxation by citation," a situation exacerbated by the sheer number of departments, 18,000 throughout the U.S. A bill is pending in Congress to restrict the amount of revenue local governments can collect from traffic citations. In St. Louis County, which has 90 municipalities and 59 individual police departments, more communities are expected to follow the lead of Charlack and Wellston.

"This will have lawmakers around the country taking a second look at their agencies and making certain that the sole purpose of their existence is not for revenue, but to serve the public interest," said Chuck Wexler, executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, a Washington nonprofit. "Police departments should not exist if their sole purpose is to generate revenue. That's what we have tax collectors for."

Tense relations between the majority-black residents of Ferguson and the city's mostly white police force grew in part from the excessive issuance of tickets. Some area municipalities were generating more than half their annual operating revenue from citations.

Charlack Mayor Frank Mattingly said disbanding the police and joining the local cooperative will save the city about \$170,000. There was no alternative to shutting the department, which cost \$520,000 to operate, roughly half the town's annual budget.

"A lot of police officers aren't writing tickets because they're afraid they'll get in trouble," Mattingly said. "Why were we singled out?" Mattingly said more towns will be forced to consolidate their police with neighboring communities, which he said he believes is the intent of the new law.

"There's nothing else they'll be able to do," he said.

St. Louis County, a suburban area of 1 million people, forms a crescent around its namesake city. About a third of the 59 departments cover less than one square mile, according to an April 30 report from the Police Research Forum.

"In many municipalities, policing priorities are driven not by the public safety needs of the

community, but rather by the goal of generating large portions of the operating revenue for the local government," the report said.

Missouri state Sen. Eric Schmitt, a Republican from St. Louis County and sponsor of the new law, said some municipalities have "broken down the trust" between residents and the police.

"Some of these communities have used their citizens as ATMs with these speed traps," Schmitt said, pointing to economic pressures.

In the six years since the closing of the Northwest Plaza mall, the suburb of St. Ann increased the number of traffic citations 10-fold. Edmundson Mayor John Gwaltney reminded his town's sergeants and patrolmen in an April 2014 memo that "tickets that you write do add to the revenue on which the P.D. budget is established and will directly affect pay adjustments at budget time."

The Ferguson turmoil has expanded the national focus beyond frictions between blacks and police departments to the practice of ticket-writing, regardless of race.

In Colorado, the town of Nunn, which is about 31 miles south of Cheyenne, Wyo., depends on speeding citations for about 30 percent of its revenue, said Police Chief Joe Clingan. With 440 residents _ mostly senior citizens _ and few businesses, the city lacks the revenue sources that support most municipal governments, he said.

"We don't have any tax base and no retail," Clingan said. "If they want a town government, someone has to pay for it."

It shouldn't be drivers, said U.S. Rep. Emanuel Cleaver, a Missouri Democrat and sponsor of the proposed federal law restricting ticket revenue.

"That is a poor excuse and a bad plan for economic development," Cleaver said.

Cleaver's bill would establish a 30 percent limit on all municipalities and, he said, would have the effect of encouraging small police departments to merge with those of neighboring towns or have their patrolling done by the county.

"It would cost a lot less for these small towns to pay money to the county and have the county police patrol the area than to do it on their own," Cleaver said.

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