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Report Calling for Consolidation of Some St. Louis County Police Departments Draws Angry Reaction.

Northwoods Police Chief Earl Heitzenroeder said Monday that he hadn't heard a Washington-based police policy think tank was calling for the end of his department, but he didn't think much of it.

The department, whose 21 officers patrol 0.71 square mile of north St. Louis County, is one of many police departments in the county that seem more focused on raising revenue through tickets than keeping the public safe, according to a report issued Monday by the Police Executive Research Forum.

As the Post-Dispatch reported Sunday, reforms suggested by the research group include a proposal to combine 18 police departments in north St. Louis County into three clusters. Under the proposal, the police departments in Northwoods and several of the town's neighbors would become part of the much larger University City Police Department, which has 66 officers patrolling 6 square miles. Two other clusters would be part of St. Louis County police precincts.

"I know what they're getting at, but I have no comment on that," said Heitzenroeder. "Might be like me coming down and telling you how to run your newspaper."

The report noted that about a third of the county's municipalities have police departments that cover less than a square mile. The fragmentation makes it difficult to coordinate crime-fighting efforts regionwide, it said.

Several police and municipal officials lashed out at the report on Monday, saying they were upset that the research group did not contact them for comment.

"They haven't come by here," said Velda City Police Chief Dan Paulino. "I don't know what surveys, what audits or what they've looked at. But they certainly have not come here. ... I seriously question the research they used to come up with whatever they printed."

The 79-page report recommended centralized training, data collection and communications for police across St. Louis and St. Louis County, and strengthening oversight of officers.

The group said the St. Louis area's fragmented, revenue-oriented policing, uneven standards for law enforcement officers and the perception of racial bias undermine public safety and have contributed to high crime rates and costly services.

The report was commissioned by Better Together, a St. Louis-based nonprofit group studying possible benefits of regional cooperation, which has published a series of reports pointing to inefficiencies in public safety, public finance, public health and economic development.

Chuck Wexler, the research group's executive director, said he was not surprised by the negative reaction.

He said the investigators who studied St. Louis-area policing had never seen anything like the dozens of tiny municipalities stacked on top of one another, using their police to raise revenue. The study found that police departments in a number of those cities were lacking.

“These cities were picked based upon high crime rates, high amounts of tickets written and a high number of officers, and they stopped people at a significant rate for minor things,” he said. “So it wasn’t like we picked them arbitrarily. We had criteria.

“Ultimately, these decisions are made by the people who live in these communities,” he added.

“The people who live there deserve the best type of policing and the best service.”

But Alan Baker, the city attorney for Hillsdale, questioned whether the best service would be turning his city’s policing over to University City.

He said about a decade ago, “we floated a proposal to St. Louis County about what it would cost and what we would receive if they took over the police department. ... I could tell you at the time their bid was between 30 and 40 percent more than we were paying and it was for half the service. They were going to have one officer on a shift instead of a minimum of two.”

The study didn’t mention anything “about what U. City’s officers could do that our officers aren’t doing.”

Myrtle Spann, mayor of Beverly Hills, said she had not heard about the report calling for her city to join University City’s police department.

The policing policy group pointed to her city’s massive rate of arrests for nontraffic offenses, such as housing code violations: 1,088 violations per 1,000 residents. By comparison, St. Louis County police make just 21 such arrests per 1,000 people.

“This is something I believe has to be started by our citizens,” she said. “They’re the ones who started our police force.”

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