

HPOU: TIME FOR A NEW GENERAL IN HOUSTON CRIME WAR?

McGrath assisted the then-president of the Houston Police Officers Union, Hans Marticiuc, with his June 12, 2006 Houston Chronicle op-ed piece titled, "Will officers say they need new leader in crime war?"

HANS MARTICIUC, PRESIDENT, HOUSTON POLICE OFFICERS UNION | When he heard that one of his players had received four Fs and one D on his report card, Shelby Metcalf, a former basketball coach at Texas A&M, reportedly told the player: "Son, it looks like you're spending too much time on one subject." I don't know if Coach Metcalf really said that; but I do know that, since late last year, many HPD officers have privately confided that they feel the same way after two years under Houston Police Chief Harold Hurtt. Many have told me that, overall, Chief Hurtt's leadership is well below par, and where this chief does exert himself the results are anything but satisfactory.

That is why, last week, the Houston Police Officers Union started formally surveying 4,700 Houston Police officers to determine their professional opinion on the job performance and policies of Chief Hurtt. We hope to gather, tabulate, and announce the results on July 11.

Why are we doing this, and why should you care?

First, at a time when violent crime is increasing in Houston, HPD officers tell us every day they are concerned that Chief Hurtt has chosen to focus on misplaced priorities such as officers' tattoos, facial hair, and other cosmetic matters that have little to do with an officer's ability to protect people in our city from deadly criminals. Since Chief Hurtt has taken over HPD, our city and citizens have witnessed a two-year period during which violent crime in Houston increased after a prolonged period of time during which crime had declined.

In fact, a Houston Chronicle story this month noted that "Homicides went from 272 in 2004 to 334 last year in Houston. In comparison, Dallas saw its homicides decrease slightly, from 248 to 202; San Antonio had a slight drop from 94 to 86; and Austin held steady during the two-year period at 26." Other big cities known for violent crime, such as Baltimore, Detroit and Los Angeles, also saw declines from 2004 to 2005 according to this same report.

Second, unlike the successful 655 Patrol Strategy Program implemented by former Mayor Bob Lanier in the early 1990s to deal with the Houston crime crisis, we are concerned that Chief Hurtt's temporary overtime strategies — targeting a handful of apartment complexes in southwest Houston — may only serve to push violent criminal activities to other less protected areas of the city.

After we questioned this policy, Chief Hurtt issued a regrettable, and misleading, news release in which he falsely claimed that officers don't "agree with the urgency" of police overtime initiatives. Contrary to this absurd claim, HPD officers support zero-tolerance programs that target crime hot spots in the city. We continue to believe such a program would work better, however, if the chief tried working with, not against, the officers who are on the front lines in the fight against crime so that officers are effectively deployed, scheduled and equipped.

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Finally, and most importantly, we believe that our fellow Houstonians and our elected representatives at City Hall need to know what the men and women who make up HPD have concluded about the current police department's leadership. As the first responders in the fight against crime, we have tried repeatedly to make constructive suggestions to help address the crime increases in Houston. In each case, it seems, this chief has ignored the men and women with local experience out on the front lines.

Meanwhile, more Houstonians are being killed, hurt, and threatened by violent crime. Clearly, this unacceptable trend cannot be allowed to continue.

For the record, the Houston Police Officers Union takes no joy in what we are doing. After Chief Hurtt's first year on the job, on March 27, 2005, I was quoted in the Houston Chronicle defending the chief, and essentially rooting for him in his efforts to turn HPD around. After the past year, however, many frontline police officers are deeply troubled. Many officers have essentially told me that Chief Hurtt is fiddling while the city burns and, thereby, is unnecessarily putting all two million people in our communities at risk.

Being police chief in Houston is a big job. Not everyone — even someone who may have done a good job in a different department in a different city — is able to succeed in a metropolis as big, diverse and dynamic as Houston. Time will tell if the rank and file officers think it is time to find a new general to lead them into battle in the local war against crime.

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