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Plan to divert \$1 million from Minneapolis NRP debated

Steve Brandt, Star Tribune

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A plan to move \$1 million from spending priorities set by Minneapolis neighborhoods to community-based law enforcement programs will be debated by neighborhood and political leaders today.

The proposal from Council President Paul Ostrow aims to restore some public-safety spending that was cut after recent losses of state aid.

Ostrow would divert the money from the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP) to the city's police, fire and public works departments. Ordinarily, the program spending plans are set by residents at neighborhood meetings.

Ostrow points out that 35 neighborhood groups made policing one of their priorities in plans they approved in the first phase of the program, which began in 1991.

But only 23 of them -- about a third of the city's neighborhood groups -- actually devoted money to those plans.

By diverting money to programs such as bike and foot patrols, community-based prosecution and police teams that will work with block clubs, Ostrow said, the city could address concerns about policing levels that he hears at neighborhood meetings.

The Revitalization Program's governing board will consider the issue, as well as public comments on the program, this afternoon. In April, the board voted to send Ostrow's proposal to neighborhood associations for comment. The handful of such groups that have responded generally favor the plan.

Police Chief Robert Olson said that the money would be used to keep 10 officers available for duties set by precinct commanders after consulting with their advisory committees. He pledged that the officers would be used for

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neighborhood enforcement activities separate from normal police responses to emergency calls.

Rep. Joe Mullery, DFL-Minneapolis, is one Revitalization Program board member who opposes Ostrow's proposal, contending that the transfer would be illegal.

Although laws governing the program generally bar the city from substituting Revitalization Program money for ongoing city spending, the program's Director Robert Miller and Ostrow say that using money to restore services that are cut should meet legal muster. Miller has asked a lawyer to review the legal issue.

The transfer would be the third diversion of money from the program's second phase, which began in 2001. The Revitalization Program's board had set aside \$4 million for retail revitalization efforts and \$16 million for affordable housing programs.

But one NRP board member, neighborhood representative Cam Gordon, said setting aside the \$1 million seems contrary to the program's philosophy of empowering neighborhoods. He said he is leaning against it, although he is concerned that some might criticize the program for not supporting basic city services.

Two Hennepin County commissioners who serve on the board are split on the plan: Gail Dorfman, said last week that she is against Ostrow's proposal. Peter McLaughlin called it a reasonable response to state aid reductions.

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