Critics halt plan to divert $1 million from NRP

Steve Brandt, Star Tribune

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Neighborhood representatives dug in their heels Monday and blocked a bid by top Minneapolis officials to dig into neighborhood money to find $1 million for community policing.

Officially, the proposal is only delayed for 60 days. But it was clear during a debate by the governing board for the city's Neighborhood Revitalization Program that City Council President Paul Ostrow and Mayor R.T. Rybak haven't built majority support for it.

Ostrow had proposed diverting the $1 million from the NRP to restore some policing programs that fell victim to the city's budget cutbacks. He said that Monday's delay is understandable because neighborhoods are concerned about continued funding of the NRP.

The NRP uses taxes and other revenues from city development districts to finance priorities set within neighborhoods. When the program began more than a decade ago, it had $20 million annually at its disposal. That has been trimmed to $11 million in recent years because of state-induced reductions in the tax yields of the development districts. City projections indicate the yield will be even less in the future.

NRP Director Robert Miller said that the board's delay on the community policing money puts pressure on the City Council to settle the program's overall financing issue. The council is scheduled to address the issue on July 18, although when the matter will come to a vote is less certain.

Ostrow argued that the city faces a critical need for restoring neighborhood police services that go beyond simply responding to 911 calls. He would earmark $1 million in NRP funds for priorities that police precinct commanders would set after consulting advisory councils of residents.

The proposal stalled for three main reasons:

• A backlash among neighborhood representatives over yet another proposal to dip into the program to fund ongoing city programs when the NRP's future

is itself uncertain. Previously, the NRP's governing board set aside $20 million for affordable housing and commercial streets.

"What is next, Paul?" board member Carol Pass, of the Phillips neighborhood, asked Ostrow. "Where do we stop, or do we just write a blank check and give it all away?"

• Questions arose about the legality of the proposal, both among neighborhood representatives and others on the board. The law that created the NRP generally prohibits the substitution of NRP dollars for ongoing city programs. Ostrow argued that the restoration of services already cut by the city falls outside that prohibition.

• Complaints about a lack of clarity over how the money would be used for community policing and how allocations would be made.

Even if the NRP board eventually approves the money, the delay means that it couldn't be put into use until fall, rather than during the summer, when street activity is higher. Ostrow proposed that the money could be spent through the end of 2004.

Police Chief Robert Olson, who made a pitch for the money, said, "We'll take it whenever we can get it."

Rybak came into office portraying himself as an advocate for neighborhoods, but on this issue, he finds himself opposite board representatives elected by neighborhoods. He said afterward that he'll keep looking for money to plug the city's budgetary gaps and called public safety the city's top priority.

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