

To the Police Services Board

Safety happens when we invest in the basic infrastructure of our communities. It happens when we are fed and housed, when our health and mental health care needs are met, and when we feel a part of our communities. I feel that we are living at a time of unprecedented alienation. I see our communities strained by a lack of access to basic necessities. That strain produces conflict, a feeling of precarity, and suspicion towards our neighbours. To continue to inflate the police budget, while people struggle to meet their basic needs, is to deepen the root causes of the very problems police purport to solve.

The budget of any government is the clearest reflection of its priorities, and in turn, the society that budget helps shape. It is no wonder that in the City of Hamilton, with the highest concentration of disabled people in Ontario, with one of the worst environmental records anywhere in the country, and with thousands struggling to find and keep affordable housing, the top line item on the budget is the Hamilton Police Service (HPS). Policing is the City of Hamilton's highest priority.

While every other City department is scrutinized for cost saving measures, HPS appears to receive an annual carte blanche, guaranteed to get whatever it asks for. This cost is always justified by an endlessly adaptable illogic. In years when violent crime increases, the logic goes that more police will save us. In years when violent crime decreases, we argue that this is only because of the presence of more police, and double down. According to HPS, we must maintain the "current levels of service" because the role of police is becoming ever more complex and multifaceted. Indeed, according to the HPS, with enough money, they could be the solution to literally any problem. Traffic fatalities caused by badly designed surface streets? More police on traffic enforcement. Calls from housed constituents afraid of their neighbours living on the street? More police on patrol. An opioid crisis? More police arresting alleged drug dealers. A lack of emergency mental health support? More mental health first aid training for police officers. I feel certain that there will never come a day when the chief of the Hamilton Police stands before council and proudly announces that the mission of the police has been accomplished, and we can finally start considering something else, like housing, or universal transit, to be our highest priority.

Spending millions of dollars to equip police with military grade weapons, including an armored personnel carrier is an irresponsible use of taxpayer money. We don't need a mounted division, or a pipe band to investigate serious crimes. Nor do we need to spend added millions policing individuals in encampments, when that same money could go towards providing housing solutions. I would like to see the number of police reduced through retirement attrition. The police budget is nearly three times the housing budget, and five times the budget for paramedics. We should absolutely refuse to allow for the continued growth of this over inflated municipal department. I appreciate that a certain amount of this year's budget increase is effectively mandated by the province. Those portions of the budget that are going towards hiring more officers should be cut. I'm also concerned about the expanded use of "information technologies" by police. Increasingly we see police surveillance, including the use of drones and advanced hacking softwares, directed at peaceful civil liberty and human rights movements. I fail to see how surveilling encampments or protests with drones is making anyone safer.

When I think about the most generous analogy that one could give to the HPS, it is of a bucket underneath a leaking roof. Despite the obvious conclusion that our priority should be to fix the roof, for as long as I've lived in Hamilton, the priority of Council has been to buy bigger buckets while the roof caves in around us. But even this analogy is misleading, because the HPS do not catch the falling water. They give the illusion of catching the falling water. In less poetic terms, they provide the appearance of safety to a certain kind of resident. One who lives in a house with a satisfactory income, and whose only interaction with police is limited to speeding tickets. Indeed, speeding and traffic enforcement constitutes the majority of the police's role in our society. Very rarely if ever do police actually stop violent crimes from occurring (if you don't believe me you can take it from Chief Bergen who says this every year when he presents his request for more money). Police arrive after the crime has already transpired.

The problem with police is not, per se, the character of individual police officers, a lack of training, or a laxity of standards, it is the logic of the institution itself. I'm happy to have some citizens in our society dedicated to deescalating conflict. But one cannot deescalate conflict if one's prime directive is to gain control of the conflicting parties. I would love if, at the dial of a phone, help could be sent to anyone in crisis, but that is impossible, if the people in crisis are afraid of the violence that will be inflicted on them by the very people who will answer the call for help.

I refuse to live in a city where safety comes out of the barrel of a gun. I refuse to live in a city where "security" means a gun and badge on every corner, rather than a house and food for every person. Thus I ask the Police Services Board: What kind of city is this? Do we, the citizens, decide our priorities? Or do the police?