

Let's fight violent crime within existing budgets

By Joseph W. Brady / Contributed Content

Posted Aug 21, 2017 at 9:26 AM

Updated Aug 21, 2017 at 9:27 AM

In the weeks since the publication of my Daily Press Op-Ed piece entitled "Violent Crime and the Future of the Victor Valley," public discussion of the High Desert's violent crime problem has been increasing. In a presentation sponsored by the Victorville Chamber of Commerce, Sheriff John McMahon acknowledged that violent crime on the High Desert is up 20 percent for the first six months of 2017.

Predictably, this has led local politicians to reach for their favorite weapon of choice, the tax increase. Already, the City of Victorville has placed a half-cent sales tax increase geared toward public safety on the November 2017 ballot. More recently, First District Supervisor Robert Lovingood has called for a countywide sales tax increase to be targeted toward public safety.

In the private sector, where I have spent my entire 38-year career, when a new challenge emerges we do not have the luxury of simply raising our prices to address the issue. Rather, we must re-prioritize our existing expenditures to live within our means while facing the new challenge. Similarly, during my time in office as a Victor Valley Community College Trustee, my colleagues and I have had to work within our existing budgets even as new issues have come up. We have successfully done so, eliminating a \$3.5 million structural budget deficit in the process.

Local government payroll data found at Transparentcalifornia.com suggests that cities in the High Desert have the resources to address violent crime without raising taxes. Adelanto, Apple Valley, Barstow, Hesperia and Victorville have nearly 200 employees with annual salary and benefit packages in excess of \$100,000. These employees work in departments such as animal services, recreation and recycling, but not many work in public safety as all High Desert cities except Barstow contract out police services to the county. At the county

level, with its \$1.6 billion payroll and over 800 workers with salaries and benefits exceeding \$200,000, there are ample resources to devote to fighting violent crime without raising taxes.

Surely there are lower priority programs and positions that can be reduced in order to devote more of the city and county budgets to fighting violent crime without going to the well for yet another tax increase. Before we contemplate increasing taxes there should be a top-to-bottom analysis of existing expenditures.

The limitations of a tax-and-spend approach to the problem are numerous. First, sales tax increases require a two-thirds vote to be approved, a very high threshold for an impoverished area already awash in taxes. Should the tax measures fail we would be four months further down the road with no solution at hand. Secondly, we in the High Desert would have no assurances that our tax dollars would not be siphoned away, like those from the recently enacted gasoline tax increase and cap-and-trade taxes, to more populated areas down the hill. Thirdly, there is the question of how much of the tax increase would go toward an increase in cops on the beat rather than to cover high-cost contracts already in place for existing public safety employees.

Finally, with 57 percent of the population of High Desert cities on public assistance, according to the latest estimate of the County Human Services Department, the burden of a sales tax increase would fall on them as well as residents who are working to support their families without the benefit of subsidies.

Although it is encouraging that our elected leaders have recently demonstrated a renewed interest in the issue of violent crime, I would strongly urge them to forego tax increases in favor of cutting lower priority programs and services while increasing spending on fighting violent crime in the High Desert.

Joseph W. Brady is president of the Bradco Companies, a High Desert commercial brokerage firm, and a Victor Valley Community College District Trustee.