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Mayor seeks cash for new police

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Mayor Dave Bronconnier is stepping up his fight for new police officers heading into a meeting today with Premier Ed Stelmach, armed with headlines of gang violence and drug arrests.

With a new Herald/Leger Marketing poll showing one in four Calgarians feel less safe in their communities than they did a year ago, Bronconnier will ask the province to dig into its \$8.5-billion surplus to help pay for 400 new officers.

"I don't believe there's going to be too many people in the political realm that aren't going to want to support initiatives targeted towards the gang activity that's here," the mayor said.

Calgary police announced 14 gang-related arrests Wednesday, showcasing \$1.7 million worth of drugs and weapons seized in raids dating back to last year. Bronconnier and police Chief Rick Hanson will tell Stelmach that police are working on several major gang investigations.

Bronconnier and Hanson will tell the premier they need to recruit 400 more officers in the next three years.

City council is being asked by the mayor to fast-track money for 201 of those officers, and the mayor expects the province and Ottawa to outdo their promises and pledge the other half.

Most of the 14 arrests announced Wednesday happened within the past two months although some date back to 2007, including a cocaine bust near Cochrane in November, said Acting Staff Sgt. Martin Schiavetta.

The final, key arrest of 25-year-old Justin Rossbach on extortion, firearms and drug charges occurred last week.

Hersh Wolch, the lawyer for three of the people named in Operation

Backlash, said he was surprised to see his clients in media reports for crimes they have already answered for in the courts. "The impression created is that this was a takedown of some huge gang yesterday," Wolch said.

As to the timing of the announcement made a day before the mayor's discussion with Stelmach, Wolch said it is a "remarkable coincidence."

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart said it does help the city's case.

"Certainly, Mayor Bronconnier was well aware that this investigation was concluding last week, so the timing with us going forward and needing more police officers is very timely," she said.

The mayor's office confirmed Bronconnier had known about the investigation, but didn't know it had ended until the police news release Wednesday morning.

Schiavetta added: "We don't control how our investigations lead. The timing was right for us to conclude the investigation and it happened to occur last week."

As part of the year-long investigation, police seized 10 firearms, \$1.7-million worth of drugs and gear such as bullet-proof vests and night-vision equipment.

The charges, mostly for drug and gun possession, did not relate directly to the spate of daytime homicides or other high-profile shootings that have made it a bloody summer in Calgary.

Alberta Justice Minister Alison Redford, who will join Stelmach at today's meeting, said there are peaks and valleys in crime cycles, and the city is clearly enduring a peak. "Let's not act in a sort of knee-jerk way," she said in an interview. "I am sick and tired of the notion that everything comes down to a particular point and a particular meeting."

However, the minister didn't rule out the possibility that the mayor's demands will be met. She noted that the province has pledged to fund 200 new recruits around Alberta in the next two years. "I think the province has done a lot. I think we'll do more, and I'm not sure what," Redford said.

A Calgary Herald/Leger Marketing poll of 900 Albertans last week showed that 23.6 per cent say they feel less safe than they did a year ago. In Calgary, 24.5 per cent feel less safe, while 64.3 per cent feel as safe and 8.5 per cent feel safer. (For the Calgary sample size of 300 respondents, there is a 5.6 percentage point margin of error, 19 times out of 20.)

Calgary police statistics have shown violent crimes on a steady decline for years, although Leger pollster Marc Tremblay said the spread of murders into residential neighbourhoods like Marlborough and Saddle Ridge and sensational stories of daylight shootings stoke anxiety. "They make headlines and I think they scare people," he said.

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