More Police Manpower Possible In Affluent Downtown

By Matthew Blake
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The Chicago City Council will likely not press Mayor Rahm Emanuel to hire more police officers than the figure already laid out in Emanuel’s proposed 2013 budget.

However, one idea from Police Department Superintendent Garry McCarthy’s city council testimony this week is to allow private business to hire off-duty police for additional protection. Ald. Brendan Reilly (42nd) suggested the plan as a way to protect downtown businesses in “hospitality and tourism areas.” Reilly’s 42nd ward includes neighborhoods such as the Gold Coast and River North, which have been victims of teenage “flash mob” criminal activity.

McCarthy said he would be “very interested” in Reilly’s idea, and today the Chicago Sun-Times sort of endorsed the plan as “an intriguing way to put more cops on the street.”

However, it could be another roundabout way in which public safety resources get concentrated downtown.

The idea of downtown businesses as under siege is “more perception than reality,” argues Amisha Patel, executive director of Grassroots Collaborative. Certainly, city statistics show that most homicides and other violent crime happen miles from the 42nd ward.

But what helps a wealthy part of the city does not necessarily hurt the most crime-ridden communities. “I really see this as a win-win,” says Arthur Lurigio, a psychology professor at the Loyola University of Chicago who studies crime.

“Officers have a right to earn extra income,” Lurigio says, plus off-duty police might “correct the erroneous impression” that downtown is dangerous.

But Lurigio wants “more of a public debate about how best to use police time.” This includes a focus on South and West Side businesses that might not be able to afford hiring off-duty police.

The union representing Chicago police cautiously back Reilly’s idea.

“We would rather see the city hiring more police officers, but lieu of that it does allow officers to make more money,” Pat Camden, spokesman for the Chicago Fraternal Order of Police, told Progress Illinois. “It’s a short-term solution to the problem that we need more manpower.”
The police department plans to employ 12,500 officers by the end of next year, including hiring 457 new officers this year and 500 new officers in 2013.

Camden notes that the CPD already works with private companies for “major sporting events” and that the movie industry hires off-duty uniformed police officers. In fact, Camden says officers are allowed to moonlight in a variety of positions with just a few exceptions.

“You can’t work in establishments that sell strictly alcohol” and CPD generally prohibits “spending too many hours working off-duty,” Camden says.