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Chief Ward, Riles argue over issues

By William Brand, Oakland Tribune

Sunday, October 10, 2004 - OAKLAND -- A heated dispute over Measure Y with Oakland Police Chief Richard Word and former City Councilmember Wilson Riles Jr. trading opinions -- dominated an open forum on election issues in North Oakland on Saturday morning.

The forum -- convened by Oakland City Councilmember Jane Brunner (North Oakland) at Peralta Elementary School -- covered most of the ballot issues facing Oakland voters on Nov. 2.

But only Measure Y drew fire and vocal comments. Besides Chief Word, who strongly backs the measure, and Riles, a leading opponent, a number of citizens spoke. Most opposed it.

In a brief appearance City Council President Ignacio De La Fuente endorsed the measure.

City Councilmember Jane Brunner, who convened the forum, said the measure is not perfect; that more needs to be done to prevent violence. But, she said, she is impressed with the officers who work in her North Oakland district.

Measure Y would tax property owners and raise \$19.9 million annually -- to hire 63 more police officers and expand social programs to help the city's young people steer clear of violence.

The money will allow the department to work on crime reduction, domestic violence and child abuse, Chief Word said.

Word said that the Oakland Police Department's relations with citizens is improving. Anti-police lawsuits have fallen to 62 last fiscal year from 93 in 2001, he said.

Each year, the department writes 30,000 tickets and officers handles about 100,000 incidents -- many with people who don't want officers in their face, Word said. But complaints have fallen from 281 in 2001 to 216 last year.

"Measure Y will allow the police to place a community relations officer in each of the 57 beats in Oakland -- officers whose job will be to help residents and know the community, he said. Other officers will help strengthen understaffed crime reduction teams, Word said.

Three officers also will be added to a school police unit focused on preventing truancy, he said, and truancy leads to crime.

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Riles flatly disagreed.

"We have a critical problem within our community," he said. "Measure Y is continuing to do things the same way and with the same result. That's insanity."

"We all know the data show that more police officers don't prevent crime," Riles said. He pointed out that a settlement case in the civil lawsuit involving the renegade cops known as the "Riders," cited poor supervision, poor training and poor retraining of officers. "In areas where crime is the worst, that's where the police have the worst community relations."

He noted that a few years ago his daughter was kidnapped and the kidnapper was caught only because she kicked out a tail light and the driver was stopped for that vehicle violation. Later, he said another of his daughters was forced to lie prone on the ground after a traffic stop for a seat belt violation.

"Let's not play games; let's vote this down and get serious." Supervisor Nate Miley has started a program to prevent violence in the community ... let's get on board with that, rather than dealing with something that will not work," Riles said.

Council President De La Fuente said he agrees with Riles that the measure is a compromise between supporters of anti-violence programs and those who want more police on the street.

"Is there a problem with the police? Absolutely. Do we need improvement? Absolutely. But most officers are good hardworking officers," he said.

Word told the crowd of about 60 that he sits on Supervisor Miley's committee and likes that approach. But the department's plans will work, he said, pointing to Long Beach, where a similar plan was approved.

"You're flying a kite with holes in it," Riles said. "More string won't make it fly."