

New Orleans mayor announces semi-private police force

Tom Hall
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New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu announced last Thursday the creation of a special police force that will operate in the French Quarter, the historic tourist and entertainment district in the city's downtown.

The “Nola Patrol,” as it is being called by City Hall, will consist of about 50 civilian members tasked with handling routine traffic, sanitation, and permit violations. Its members will receive only 4-6 weeks of training and be paid \$29,000 per year.

Nola Patrol will operate under the 8th District of the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD), which covers the French Quarter, although its officers will not be sworn in or carry guns. In addition to “freeing up” NOPD from responding to “non-emergency” incidents, it is also hoped that it will serve as a “recruitment pipeline” for fully-trained officers.

The force will be paid for entirely by private contributions—despite its official status as a government program—to the tune of about \$2.5 million per year. The New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB), the principal marketing and economic development organization for the city's tourism industry, will fund the entire program out of a self-assessed 1.75 percent levy on hotel reservations, enacted earlier this year.

Although Nola Patrol had not been announced at the time, the levy had apparently been passed with the program in mind. Robert Watters, owner of the Rick's Cabaret nightclub on Bourbon Street and chairman of the French Quarter Management District, told *The Advocate* newspaper, “That was the intent all along, and that's why we supported the hospitality assessment.”

Tourism is one of the few industries in New Orleans that has experienced growth in recent years. Last year the city of less than 380,000 hosted 9.28 million visitors, who spent \$6.47 billion. The food and

hospitality sector, as defined by federal statistics, employs over 82,000 people in the entire metropolitan area, almost all of whom earn poverty-level wages.

Fear of crime in the normally placid French Quarter has been promoted by local media and politicians in the aftermath of two attacks on Bourbon Street, the neighborhood's central street known for its night clubs, resulting in two deaths and ten injuries. The state police sent a temporary force of 50 officers in July to buttress the police presence in the neighborhood, which may become indefinite after the City Council passed a resolution endorsing governor Bobby Jindal's call for a permanent state trooper presence.

New Orleans was the per capita murder capital of the United States until 2012 when it was overtaken by Detroit, but the heavily trafficked tourist areas had been largely left untouched, owing to an exceptionally high police presence. However, NOPD has shrunk in size significantly since Hurricane Katrina, due to both high attrition and a dwindling budget. A minor scandal developed in late March when a 911 call to report an armed robbery in progress went unanswered in the affluent Uptown neighborhood, after which it was revealed in the press that between 10-12 percent of all 911 calls placed in the city went unanswered.

Although the city's proposal to pay for a basic public expenditure through what are essentially private donations is unprecedented, the program is a natural extension of the intermingling of businesses, particularly the tourism industry, and city government that has long been common in New Orleans.

For decades, police officers in New Orleans have supplemented their income through increasingly lucrative and often corrupt private off-duty “details” contracted with businesses, neighborhood associations, and the rapidly growing number of movie crews taking

advantage of the city's tax cuts for the film industry.

The detail system, the demand for which increases as regular police coverage declines, is a massive conduit for police corruption. Wages from private details account for upwards of half of many officers' annual income. Police officers who act as "coordinators" for their details typically receive a cut of around 10 percent of all payments, a sum that often reaches tens of thousands of dollars. Businesses with paid details often receive favorable treatment from the police, who do not want to upset their sources of income.

As part of a federal consent decree signed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the federal government has mandated a major overhaul of the detail system. The system itself, however, continues unabated; indeed, it has become an official program of the city government. All details are now routed through a central office in City Hall, which takes a much larger cut than the former detail "coordinators."

The city recently announced that it had reached a deal with the New Orleans Saints football team to provide 200 off-duty officers for security during home games. The federal government has called the program into question, but only on the narrow grounds that the officers will have worked more than the maximum allowable number of detail hours per week.



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