



Written by [Kelly Holt](#) on July 7, 2011

Tiny Alto, Texas, Not the First to Mothball Its Police Dept

The city council of tiny Alto, Texas — population 1,200, about 140 miles southeast of Dallas — shuttered its police department on June 15 because of a budget shortfall. In order to make up a \$185,000 deficit, the council furloughed the four police officers and Chief Charles Barron for six months.

According to [CBS News](#), Barron said,

They put a bulls-eye target on law enforcement — police department — and police department only. There have been accusations that the police department is not generating enough revenue. Well, police departments are not revenue generators.



Residents are bracing for a crime spike. Mayor Monty Collins, who voted against the measure, commented, “Everybody’s talking about ‘bolt your doors, buy a gun.’ ”

Business owners have removed valuable objects from their premises; a newspaper’s antique printing press, for example, is being moved to a museum for safekeeping.

Alto lies 12 miles south of Rusk, the county seat of Cherokee County. The sheriff’s department, which covers a 1,000-square-mile area, is now responsible for policing the town. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on June 29 that [Sheriff James Campbell](#) said his department of 25 deputies and reservists will feel the strain of the extra burden, having already taken on nearby Wells, population 800, which closed its one-man police department earlier this year. Crime increased there immediately, but has stabilized. Campbell indicated, “I’m going to try, but I can’t guarantee you there will always be an officer in [Alto].”

Alto Councilman Jerry Flowers, a hay farmer, claims, “We had to do something drastic. The police department, being a non-money-making entity, was the easiest to get rid of while we catch our breath and build up some cash.” City council members declined interviews with CBS News, though one commented, “When you can’t make payroll, you have to make cuts.”

Police Chief Barron says budget cuts should have been made somewhere other than the police department, given crime rates. “Why did they totally throw public safety to the wind?” he asked. “If the city is broke as they say, I would think they can’t afford anybody else either.”

The struggling town’s natural-gas distribution system, which provides most of its revenue, needed extensive repairs that wiped out their reserves. Reportedly, reduced sales and tax revenues have also affected the city budget.

Alto’s per-capita crime rate exceeds the statewide average. Last year, there were 39 larcenies, 23 burglaries, two assaults, one robbery, and one auto theft: 66 crimes — up from 51 the year before — though that year included a rape and four aggravated assaults.



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Criminals may already be targeting the city.

"In the last 24 hours, we've answered 18 calls in the county; seven of them were in Alto," Sheriff Campbell noted. Last week, residents called law enforcement on four people allegedly attempting a bank robbery. Deputies caught up with the suspects in nearby Rusk, where they were charged with aggravated robbery and evading arrest.

Kelly Curry, who manages an off-road vehicle park, asserted, "The thought that we could be 35 or 40 minutes from getting the sheriff's deputy here, depending on where they are in the county, is scary." She has two guns for self defense.

Alto isn't the only small town in the country with a police department suffering from budget woes. Half Moon Bay, California is now patrolled by the San Mateo county sheriff's department. The dissolution of that force saved the town \$500,000 a year. Nazareth, Pennsylvania, and Wenonah, New Jersey, are both in the process of deciding whether to disband their local police forces and have other municipalities assume policing duties. Whether a county sheriff is obligated to provide services free of charge to a local community or is paid for them depends on state law. In most cases, the sheriff's office is paid, said Fred Wilson, director of operations of the National Sheriffs' Association.

According to the *Wall Street Journal* article:

The closure of small-town police forces is part of a broader consolidation of services in communities across the U.S. Keeping the peace is rarely a revenue-making operation and is easier to outsource to county or state agencies than responsibilities such as utilities, some officials say. Others see advantages in having a bigger, more professional force patrol their communities.

But such a move causes concern for proponents of local police forces. Regional forces are already stretched thin as it is, but the outsourcing of services to a larger entity erodes the ties between officers and the community, an essential element in crime fighting, notes Mark Marshall, president of the International Association of Chiefs of Police and chief of the Smithfield, Virginia, police department. Many analysts say that the loss of local policing also gives rise to the politicizing of police forces, and could lead to nationalizing them, given the right set of circumstances.

The John Birch Society has long been an advocate of local policing, recognizing that regionalized or nationalized forces are one of the hallmarks of a dictatorship. In the 1960s, the Society made famous the slogan, "[Support Your Local Police](#)," warning against the outsourcing of these duties. More important is individual understanding and responsibility to keep policing local. Whether small town budget problems such as Alto's result in long-term abdication of law enforcement remains to be seen, but it is still a clear warning to others.

Alto residents are circulating a petition demanding that the department be restored. Police Chief Barron says he just hopes to get back to his real job — protecting the people of his town. "That's my life," he says. ... I miss it."



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