

Posted on Sun, Feb. 22, 2004

Summit security costs public millions

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The bills are in: Security for the Free Trade Area of the Americas summit will cost taxpayers at least \$23.9 million -- about \$1.4 million more than anticipated.

The federal government will reimburse up to \$8.5 million of that amount, with the rest coming out of local coffers.

Police and county administrators justify the costs, saying they had to prepare for the worst -- violent protests like the ones during the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle.

"A lot of the cost you're looking at was to have a [police] presence there to make sure we were prepared," said County Manager George Burgess. "The fact that the presence was there was what insured that you didn't have a lot of what you had in Seattle."

Business leaders say the cost of securing the city was worth it because it will improve Miami's shot at securing the FTAA headquarters. But demonstrators in the smaller-than-expected crowds say it was an expensive assault on free speech.

While two civilian panels search for the truth, protesters are lining up to sue. More litigation costs are coming.

Last summer, before the November summit, authorities told The Herald they estimated security would cost \$16.1 million, including the federal reimbursement but not counting the lawsuits.

It is not clear when that number was revised, but in the months before the summit the city of Miami budgeted an extra \$2.9 million and Miami-Dade County allocated an additional \$2.5 million. The federal government also committed more than originally anticipated, bringing the budgeted total to \$22.5 million.

Miami-Dade County released its cost figures Friday night, and they will be distributed by Burgess on Monday to the County Commission. The county was the last of the police agencies involved to provide FTAA expenses.

LOTS OF OVERTIME

According to those figures, the county spent \$10.45 million in overtime, supplies and equipment -- more than the other 21 agencies that contributed to the effort combined. Most of that came from the police department, which spent \$5.7 million on overtime alone.

County police also spent \$4.5 million in regular salaries, according to records released Friday. The total county costs, including regular salaries, were nearly \$15 million.

By comparison, the Miami Police Department, the lead agency coordinating the deployment, spent \$3.26 million for everything -- overtime, supplies, equipment, even the regular salaries of people working on FTAA.

Miami-Dade Police Director Carlos Alvarez was not available Saturday, but his spokeswoman, Cmdr. Linda O'Brien, said the department had to prepare for the worst, given what protesters had done in cities like Seattle during free trade summits.

"We had to anticipate the best we could with the information we were given and gathering," she said. "And we expected to have more violent protesters than we did . . . Historically, if you look at the property damage and the injuries in these situations in past cities, we would have been foolish not to be as absolutely fully prepared as we possibly could be."

O'Brien noted that there was almost no damage to businesses downtown -- a few were spray painted with small graffiti -- compared with \$3 million in damage to Seattle's downtown in 1999. Police here arrested 234 people, compared with about 1,300 people during similar demonstrations in Washington, D.C., in 2002 and about 600 people in Seattle in 1999.

O'Brien said the county's costs were so much larger than the other agencies because of the size of the department -- 3,000 law enforcement officers and nearly 2,000 civilian employees. The entire department moved to 12-hour shifts for the five days of the deployment, incurring a lot of overtime.

Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas was not available Saturday but his chief of staff Javier Soto said, "The mayor's not going to second-guess the law enforcement agencies in their deployment of resources for this event."

Miami Mayor Manny Diaz could not be reached.

Sgt. Angel Calzadilla, assistant to Miami Police Chief John Timoney, said police needed to blanket the downtown area.

"You can put a price tag on the physical damage that we prevented but you can't put a price tag on the damage to the city's image that we prevented by being out there," he said.

Early predictions for the Miami summit put the crowds at between 20,000 and 100,000. But only an estimated 10,000 people showed up to demonstrate in Miami -- compared with 50,000 who protested in Seattle.

Former Ambassador Luis Lauredo, executive director of the FTAA Ministerial and American Business Forum and one of the event's main organizers, declined comment on the security costs.

But Brian Neff, vice president of the South Florida Manufacturers Association, said the costs of security were worth it.

"It would be a very small price to pay should we get the FTAA headquarters," he said. "I think it would be a great thing for the community to get that. Sometimes you've got to spend money to make money."

Supporters say bringing the FTAA secretariat to Miami would cement the city's image as the trade hub of Latin America and generate thousands of spinoff jobs.

But protest groups say the massive deployment was a waste of money.

"It was way out of proportion to what the events were," said Miami resident Steve Showen, who demonstrated with the Green Party. "It was a way to try to turn it into something it was not, as if the city was being invaded."

STUNNED BY COST

And County Commissioner Joe Martinez, a former police officer and chairman of the public safety committee, said he was stunned to hear the county spent more than all the other agencies combined.

"I don't know how many officers we had out there compared to everyone else but we weren't even the primary department there," he said. "We were on the fringe, so that one is surprising."

Protesters have already filed one lawsuit in federal court and have sent Miami police three notices to sue in state court. Others may be coming.

For example, Carl Kesser, an independent cameraman, was seriously injured when a beanbag hit him in the head and lodged under his skin near his eye. He suffered nerve damage and partial paralysis on one side of his face.

Police say they didn't target Kesser specifically. He has not filed a notice of intention to sue, but his attorneys have contacted the city.

The Miami Police Department isn't the only one expecting lawsuits. Each of the other departments involved may also face claims.

The AFL-CIO, for example, has complained of members being arrested and even brutalized. Of the thousands of union members involved in the demonstrations, seven were arrested.

The county's Independent Review Panel is investigating allegations that protesters, including the unions, have made against the county police. The city's Citizens Investigative Panel is doing the same for complaints against the city.

Their investigations may take months. And the costs of the investigations have not been estimated yet.

Herald staff writers Susan Anasagasti and Charles Rabin, Herald researcher Elisabeth Donovan, and Herald database editor Tim Henderson contributed to this report.