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Robert C. Haas
Police Commissioner

Robert W. Healy
City Manager

April 11, 2013

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City Manager

Re: Council Order No. 5, dated January 14, 2013

Dear Sir:

As requested I am responding to the above council order request to investigate the possibility of a gun buy-back program in Cambridge.

Gun buyback programs seek to reduce gun violence by reducing gun ownership. They typically offer money or goods (such as cash or gift cards) in exchange for firearms, and they offer anonymity to those who exchange them. Police may check whether a returned gun was used in a crime, but they do not use their findings to pursue the person who returned it. Buyback programs have been popular in a number of cities (such as Boston, New York, Oakland, Miami, Chicago, etc.), and many more are considering implementing such programs in the aftermath of the Newtown, CT school shooting. Early evaluations have indicated that buybacks have had no observable effect on either gun crime or firearm-related injuries, as a disproportionate amount of the guns recovered were often old, broken, of low caliber, and are not linked to gun crimes.

However, more recent buyback programs seem to be recovering better weaponry than in the past. Boston's 2006 program, called "Aim for Peace," implemented newer measures (including targeted advertising and community involvement) which seemed to bring in better quality firearms that could potentially be linked to crime.

Some of the benefits of a gun buyback program include:

- They can build support for community programs, and increase the level of trust between the community and the police.

- While the guns may not be the same guns used in crimes, some may argue it doesn't hurt to get *some* guns off the street. And in a December 2012 Camden, NJ buyback, over 1,100 firearms, including five fully automatic assault weapons, were turned in.
- Criminals steal guns, and buybacks may make it harder to find guns to steal.
- New York City has been successful in engaging the clergy by holding several buybacks at churches, temples, and synagogues.
- The voluntary nature of the program (no one is being forced to give up guns they want to keep) appeases some gun rights proponents.

Because there has been much criticism regarding gun buyback programs, it is important to note some of their drawbacks:

- Evaluations have shown that buybacks do not directly target guns that are highly likely to be used in violence, and the characteristics of the guns collected reveal little overlap between crime guns and buyback guns.
- Some argue that buybacks are feel-good events that do not reduce gun crimes and are abused by gun dealers seeking to unload junk merchandise at a good price.
- Many question whether there is any return on the investment (thousands of dollars need to be raised, donated, or appropriated).
- The people most likely to commit crimes are also the people least likely to turn in their weapons. Conversely, most of the people turning in guns are not criminals – they are dealers, collectors, senior citizens, etc.
- In Oakland, officials offered $250 cash for each working gun, no questions asked. However, over 300 guns were bought in the first few minutes, exhausting the $80,000 allocated to the program. The PD then issued $170,000 worth of IOUs, cash which it had to later raise.
- With an estimated 300 million firearms in civilian hands and another 6 million newly manufactured firearms added each year, some view buybacks as "trying to drain the Pacific with a bucket."
- A 2009 Op-Ed in the Los Angeles Times noted, "For political theater, few things beat gun buyback programs such as the one held Saturday in Los Angeles. The resulting stacks of shotguns, rifles, handguns and even assault weapons make great TV and give the impression that politicians and police chiefs are putting a dent in the supply of dangerous firearms. It's fodder for a slow news day and a harmless enough marketing ploy -- but really reducing gun crime requires more than feel-good exercises."

If Cambridge were to implement a buyback program, there are some lessons learned from the Boston experience that could make the program more effective, including:

1) Offer graded incentives for the types of firearms turned in (i.e., $200 gift cards for handguns, $100 or $50 for rifles and shotguns);
2) Require proof of Cambridge residency;

3) Partner with the community to provide alternate drop-off locations (community and religious centers, rather than the police station); and
4) Employ a targeted media campaign that engages more of the at-risk population (i.e., social media, city buses and bus stops, etc.).

Additionally, there are some considerations that would need to be made in order to implement a buyback here in the City:

- Funding would need to be identified. Boston's 2006 program cost approximately $200,000 ($200 Target gift cards in exchange for about 1,000 guns). If this were to be done in Cambridge, how many guns would the City aim to collect? For a fraction of the amount that Boston collected, say 200 guns, this would cost $40,000.
- What happens when the program runs out of money? Would IOUs be issued, would the program simply end, or would the police department allow gun drop-offs without monetary incentive?
- There would need to be a plan for disposing the weapons.
- In order to assess the effectiveness of the program, some funding should be set aside for a research partner to conduct an evaluation regarding the effectiveness of the program.

In summary, gun buyback programs have shown limited effectiveness in reducing gun violence. However, they are effective in engaging the community and possibly removing some guns from the streets.

If further information is required please contact me.

Sincerely,

Robert C. Haas
Police Commissioner

RCH/kb