Is new precinct anti-crime tool or 'occupation'?

City Council soon will decide whether to OK north police station

By Margarita Bauza
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The proposal to move Lansing's north police precinct out of City Hall and into the neighborhoods faces a tough passage through the City Council.

The move would be a final key step in the drive by Police Chief Jerome Boles and Mayor David Hollister to decentralize the police force. The city — with council approval — already has opened a south precinct and also has stationed community police officers in many neighborhoods around the city.

Now though, a proposal to sign a $100,000-a-year lease on a building barely 10 blocks northeast of City Hall has a deeply divided council rethinking the strategy. Neither side of the issue has a clear majority on the council.

Sparrow Hospital has offered to lease a portion of the Prudden Building at 735 E. Saginaw Ave. to the city for use as a precinct station. Sparrow officials said they would pay for the renovation.

What's next 9/15/96

- A public forum from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Thursday at City Council chambers, 10th floor, 124 W. Michigan Ave.
- Call-in 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. 483-4177.

Joe Wald, director of community relations at Sparrow Hospital, said relocation of the police would help revitalize the northern section of the city. "It's consistent with what we've been trying to do in the community," Wald said.

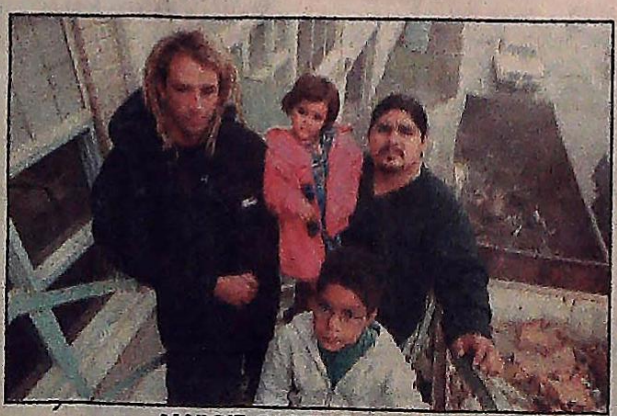
Police Chief Boles concurred.

"It's based on our whole decentralization process," he said. "It should improve access as (we) move into the neighborhoods."

Gary Setla, a police administrative officer, said moving to the Prudden building would improve working conditions and allow the department to provide better services to the community. About 75 to 100 people would operate out of the precinct station, including 14 detectives.

The new site would provide needed interview rooms and adequate public parking, he said.

Please see **STATION, 5A**



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Opponents: Steve Swart (left) and Ernesto Mireles, who oppose a north police station, say they worry about kids like Mireles' children Olivia, 4, and Ernesto, 7.

Station: Police plan meets opposition

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Boles said the City Council earlier earmarked $600,000 for the project, although he said he believes the cost will be "far under that."

But Lansing City Council President Howard Jones said that even $100,000 a year is excessive.

"Maybe we need to spend $250,000 on renovations to the (City Hall) police building" to avoid the yearly lease payment, Jones said.

He said the south precinct station, which opened this year at the corner of Cedar and Holmes streets, will cost the city $1 million over five years, a sum he termed a "joke."

Ernesto Mireles, a northside resident who is protesting the move, calls it "fiscally irresponsible."

"It doesn't make sense," Mireles said. "(The police) are facing massive shortages. They are spending a lot of money that they should use instead to hire some officers."

Mayor Hollister has given the council a Sept. 30 deadline to approve the Prudden lease, but members said they won't be rushed.

"We are not intimidated by artificial deadlines," said Ellen Beal, chairwoman of the council's Ways and Means committee "We are doing an in-depth analysis."

The possibility of a northern precinct station has prompted some controversy in northern neighborhoods, many of which have sizeable Hispanic populations.

In June, a group of Hispanic students circulated petitions that described the move as "the occupation of our neighborhood by an organization with a recently reaffirmed track record of unsolved racial problems."

About 300 people signed the petition.

Councilmember Tony Benavides said he recognizes the sensitivity of the issue, but has not been swayed by the opposition.

"I really don't have any reservations at all voting for it," Benavides said. "The reality is that there are a group of folks that are against it for their own particular reasons. I respect their position."

He said he thinks the police will treat the Hispanic community with "dignity and respect."

"If we give and take a little bit, we can negotiate our differences."

Elena Rodriguez, a northside resident, said she understands why some of her neighbors oppose the proposal.

"Some people are scared about the police," Rodriguez said. "They think police don't like Spanish people."

She said she sympathizes with the parents who say their children have been harassed or treated unfairly by the police.

"It's not fair, but at the same time I ask myself what their children are doing outside at three o'clock in the morning."

Police Chief Boles said he is aware of the resistance from some in the Hispanic community.

"I know one of the activists sees it as some kind of an occupation force," Boles said, but that view is the "furthest thing from the truth."

The positive aspects of putting the police force near their community would overcome that criticism, he said.

Lansing residents Mary and John Patenge said the move would be a good thing for the community.

They said the effect of community police has been very positive in their area and wish to see the continued relations.

"It would be nice to have a precinct nearby," Mary Patenge said.