Terry Bressi: Stonegarden was hardly a benefit to public safety

By Terry Bressi Special to the Arizona Daily Star  Sep 16, 2018

The Board of Supervisors voted in September to reject last year’s $1.4 million Stonegarden grant despite appeals from Sheriff Mark Napier.

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Having had a front-row seat to Operation Stonegarden excesses since the program first began manifesting itself in 2012 along Arizona 86 in
Southern Arizona, I was relieved to learn of the Pima County Board of Supervisors’ vote to reject the grant earlier this month. Critics of the decision claim that doing so significantly undermines public safety in underserved regions of Pima County. The terms of the contract, however, accompanied with Stonegarden enforcement data and firsthand accounts paint a different picture.

Operation Stonegarden is not a federal grant program that provides funds to local law enforcement to expand normal public safety operations into underserved areas of Pima County. Rather, the terms of the federal contract explicitly forbid local agencies from using Stonegarden funds for such a purpose:

“Per Grant guidelines, supplanting normal activities is not allowed and will not be reimbursed. As with all OPSG deployments, a direct nexus to supporting the border security efforts must be illustrated.” — FFY 2016 OPSG Program Award
Further, the program significantly limits the types of operations that local law enforcement can engage in by demanding that all OPSG deployments be approved and managed by Border Patrol personnel:

“All Stonegarden deployments must be pre-coordinated, approved and directed as part of the block schedule, named CBP operation or pre-coordinated ad hoc operation” — FFY 2016 OPSG Program Award

In other words, sheriff’s deputies working Stonegarden shifts are deployed to pre-selected areas by their Border Patrol handlers in order to conduct zero-tolerance patrols in furtherance of Border Patrol objectives, not local public safety concerns. These patrols are specifically designed to increase the number of compelled “contacts” with the traveling public for the primary purpose of identifying
illegal aliens and smugglers.

So how do these explicit Stonegarden contract obligations play out in reality? One need only listen to the overwhelmingly negative feedback the Board of Supervisors received from Pima County residents during the monthslong Stonegarden funding debate — negative feedback that put enforcement statistics between January 2012 and September 2017 in proper perspective.

Specifically, sheriff’s deputies collecting overtime from Stonegarden deployments during that time frame conducted 40,040 traffic stops with legal action only initiated in approximately 5,378 of those cases.

The resulting 13.4 percent citation-to-stop figure means that tens of thousands of Pima County residents were needlessly stopped, detained, interrogated and harassed by deputies working on behalf of their federal handlers during Stonegarden deployments.

Even more problematic, this percentage is significantly lower than the 60 percent, or greater, figure associated with traffic operations by
peer agencies around the country, suggesting that Stonegarden enforcement decisions are primarily based on profiling rather than reasonable suspicion or probable cause.

On top of all this, the Border Patrol has never shown much concern with deploying its local law enforcement resources under Stonegarden to underserved areas of Pima County, where there may be little or no law enforcement presence. Rather, the Border Patrol has always shown significant interest in turning its interior immigration checkpoints into general law enforcement operations by stationing deputies at checkpoints already fully staffed by federal agents.

Pima County Sheriff Mark Napier questions why the Board of Supervisors decided to drop Stonegarden funding after 12 years and a $16 million seat at the Stonegarden table. The question he should be asking is why he and his predecessors failed to use that seat to address the simmering public resentment and outrage that has grown out of Stonegarden enforcement priorities, priorities that have more to do with padding local wallets and pensions than ensuring public safety in underserved areas of Pima County.
While I concur with Napier that, “Public safety is not a political, partisan or ideological issue; it is a quality of life issue,” the record shows that Stonegarden has little to do with public safety. Rejecting the failed programs of yesterday is the first step toward finding sustainable solutions to the problems of today.

My thanks to the Board of Supervisors for doing just that.

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