



Memorandum

TO: HONORABLE MAYOR AND
MEMBERS OF THE CITY
COUNCIL

FROM: Councilmember Kamei
Councilmember Ortiz

SUBJECT: Item 4.1: Reinstatement of the
San José Police Department
Horse Mounted Unit

DATE: September 12, 2025

Approved:

RECOMMENDATION

1. Defer consideration of the reinstatement of the San José Police Department Horse Mounted Unit as a collateral, part-time operation to the development of the Fiscal Year 2026-2027 budget.
2. Direct the City Manager to explore alternative strategies that align with the specific priorities of enhancing SJPd visibility and strengthening community engagement in the Downtown core, and return to the City Council with recommendations as part of the Fiscal Year 2026-2027 budget development process.

BACKGROUND

The San José Police Department's Horse Mounted Unit (HMU) had a nearly four-decade history as a distinctive component of the City's approach to community policing and visible law enforcement presence in the Downtown core. However, the program's continuation should be carefully evaluated in light of current fiscal realities and existing community priorities. Although there is an offer to reimburse the city for costs from an outside organization, there should be more analysis on potential long term budget implications for large animal vet care and the stabling of these horses.

The HMU was originally established in 1986 under Police Chief Joe McNamara. The program received initial funding through \$70,000 in private donations from San José business groups, who were concerned that residents and visitors were avoiding Downtown due to perceptions of crime and a lack of safety. The HMU was conceived to increase the visibility of law enforcement and encourage people to visit Downtown businesses and events.

For many years, the HMU operated as part of the City's broader community policing efforts. The Unit would appear at parades, festivals, and major events and would patrol parks, and high-traffic corridors. The unit became a recognizable presence and a public relations asset for the Police Department.

However, the HMU's operations carried significant ongoing costs. By 2009, as the City of San José faced serious fiscal constraints, City administrators projected annual savings of approximately \$1.4 million from eliminating the HMU. Council then directed the administration to enter into an agreement with the Friends of the San José Mounted Unit, a nonprofit partner that agreed to fully fund the HMU in the amount of \$221,208 for the 2010–2011 budget year. Ultimately, in 2018, the City suspended the HMU due to budget and staffing constraints. Persistent vacancies within the Police Department made it difficult to dedicate sufficient officers to this uniquely specialized unit.

The current staff recommendation before Council seeks to reestablish the HMU as a collateral, part-time operation in Fiscal Year 2025–2026. The recommendation proposes utilizing voluntary officer overtime and significant in-kind contributions from the San José Police Foundation. Specifically, the proposal would authorize the City to accept a donation valued at approximately \$390,000, including six horses, two trucks, two horse trailers, uniforms, officer training, and other equipment.

Under the proposed model, startup costs would be fully covered through donations and existing budgeted funds. However, after Fiscal Year 2025–2026, the City would assume responsibility for an estimated \$120,000 in annual operating costs for horse care, equipment upkeep, and related expenses. Staffing would continue to rely on voluntary overtime shifts, funded through unspent overtime resources currently allocated to the Central Division. It is asserted that the program would be a cost-efficient means of significantly increasing SJPd visibility Downtown and enhancing community engagement.

ANALYSIS

Reinstating the San José Police Department Horse Mounted Unit has clear historical and symbolic value, but its reimplementation must be considered within the broader context of the City's fiscal realities. While the donation from the San José Police Foundation would fully cover initial startup costs, the City would still take on recurring annual expenses estimated beginning in Fiscal Year 2026-2027. These ongoing costs include feed, veterinary care, farrier services, utilities, and stable management at a time when San José must make careful decisions about resource allocation. In addition, the program relies on voluntary officer overtime to staff the mounted patrols. Although this approach avoids the creation of new full-time positions, it draws from a funding source that has historically experienced cost overruns. Moreover, these costs speak to supporting the unique and particularized needs of the HMU and are not portable to any other City service or function.

Examination of the proposal's details reveal addition cause for concern. The City's stables near the Tully Road Library, which previously housed the HMU, are "anticipated" to be in good

condition, but there remains uncertainty about potential future capital improvement needs. Rebuilding the unit would also likely require a significant investment of time and resources to select and train horses capable of operating safely in unpredictable Downtown environments.¹

These are specialized investments that additionally must be sustained over time to maintain operational readiness and safety. As noted above, these are unique skills that are not portable to other City services—particularized training for both horses and officers has no clear application to any other police or City function beyond the HMU.

While the HMU has historically offered a distinctive and visible form of community policing, there are other, more flexible, sustainable ways to achieve the same goals. Strategies such as deploying more foot and bicycle patrols and organizing neighborhood-based events or business district partnerships could provide consistent, high visibility engagement without the significant recurring costs associated with maintaining a horse-mounted unit.

At a time when San José very publicly struggles to balance competing priorities and address ongoing budget challenges, pursuing more cost-effective, scalable, flexible, and sustainable approaches to downtown law enforcement visibility and engagement may allow the City to achieve the same or better outcomes of enhanced public trust, greater police presence, and improved quality-of-life enforcement, while aligning our limited resources with the highest-impact strategies.

¹ Police horses require extensive training and a specific temperament to perform safely and effectively in urban environments. Horses in mounted units must remain calm under unpredictable conditions, including large crowds, loud noises, and unexpected obstacles, and respond reliably to their riders' commands. Only a small percentage of horses possess the temperament and physical traits suitable for police work. Training an adult horse can take several months to a year, with ongoing exercises to desensitize them to unusual sights and sounds. Mounted officers also undergo specialized instruction in equitation, crowd control, and tactical measures to ensure safe coordination with their horses. See <https://ker.com/equine/mounted-police-horse-force/>. See <https://nopdnews.com/post/april-2017/nopd-mounted-unit-fact-sheet/>