

## El Paso police get \$500,000 to fight gang activities

October 23, 2008

*From the Capitol*

El Paso Times

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The El Paso Police Department will receive \$500,000 to fight transnational gangs such as Barrio Azteca, Texas Homeland Security Director Steve McCraw said Wednesday.

"We're concerned about spillover violence, which is a major topic for citizens of El Paso obviously," McCraw said, "and it is headquarters for Barrio Azteca."

El Paso is the first of 13 cities statewide that will receive a total of \$4 million in federal grant money from Gov. Rick Perry to fight gangs such as Barrio Azteca, the Mexican Mafia, the Texas Syndicate and MS-13, McCraw said.

Perry announced last month that he would ask lawmakers next year to approve \$24 million for the gang initiative as part of the state's border security strategy. The money, McCraw said, would be used to share intelligence about gang operations; to investigate, arrest and prosecute gang leaders; and to start programs to prevent gangs from recruiting students.

But McCraw said Perry didn't want to wait to start the fight until legislators meet in January. So he is using federal criminal justice grant dollars to allow city police departments to pay officers overtime for patrols in hot spots where gangs operate.

Mexican cartels that are fueling the violence in Juárez and other cities, McCraw said, are turning to gangs on the U.S. side of the border such as Barrio Azteca to conduct drug and human smuggling because of security crackdowns.

"It's an escalating concern," McCraw said.

Barrio Azteca is the "primary gang operating in the El Paso-Juárez area," according to a National Drug Intelligence Center analysis.

The gang reportedly controls the sale of cocaine, heroin and marijuana in El Paso, charging so-called taxes to street dealers.

El Paso, McCraw said, was also given priority because of the continuing bloodshed and crime in Juárez.

The death toll there this year is more than 1,120 and grows by double digits almost daily.

"El Paso is ground zero, and that's one of the reasons why it is vitally important that we support El Paso law enforcement," McCraw said.

Lt. Peter Pacillas said that the El Paso Police Department had not yet been informed Wednesday of the grant but that the money would help the city combat gangs.

In El Paso, he said, gangs such as Barrio Azteca primarily work as a conduit for cartels south of the border.

Money the state has already provided for border operations over the past two years, Pacillas said, has helped to ward off crime and violence from Mexico. Expanded funding, he said, would help even more.

"Allowing us to put more officers on the street could help prevent any spillover," he said.

State Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso, who has criticized Perry's border security initiatives as efforts to have local police enforce federal immigration laws, said Texas needs a strategy to dismantle organized crime.

"Perry's grant will help gather the intelligence, file the forfeitures and target the cartels that now cross all borders," he said.