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Hallandale Backs State Crime Panel

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HALLANDALE — City commissioners agreed Tuesday to endorse a proposal for a statewide crime panel with the power to arrest organized crime suspects, grant immunity to witnesses and jail those who refuse to provide information.

In a unanimous vote, commissioners ordered the preparation of a resolution for consideration next week that asks the state Legislature to create a state crime commission.

“Organized crime has reached epidemic proportions in Florida. Something has to be done about it,” said Frank R. Pinter, chairman of the Broward County Crime Commission.

The Broward County Crime Commission, a private organization, has about 180 members, Pinter said.

If the Hallandale commission approves the endorsement resolution, as expected, the city would become the first municipality to do so, Pinter said.

The Broward County League of Cities’ 15-member board of directors approved the concept last week and referred it to member cities to consider individually, Walter W. Falck, the league’s executive director, said.

Pinter, seeking support for the proposal from Broward cities, said his concept is based on the success of a similar commission adopted in 1969 by New Jersey.

As proof of the need for the commission, Pinter told commissioners that 251 identified organized crime figures live in Broward, including 24 to 27 in Hallandale and 78 in Hollywood.

“It’s an excellent idea. New Jersey chased everyone to Florida,” Vice Mayor Arthur J. “Sonny” Rosenberg said.

But Mayor Sam Waterman was skeptical.

“Why do we need another layer (of crime-fighters) on top of the statewide grand jury?” he asked.

The statewide grand jury, Pinter contended, is a political tool because it is called into session by the governor for specific investigations and cannot initiate its own probes.

His proposal, Pinter said, calls for a panel that would essentially have police powers to investigate crime and make arrests, as well as the power to subpoena witnesses, grant immunity to witnesses and to hold people in contempt.

Pinter`s proposal is not new, however. Critics contend existing state agencies already carry out the functions Pinter suggests.

The Legislature, when it created the Florida Department of Law Enforcement in the 1960s and the statewide grand jury in the 1970s, refused to put wide- ranging police and judicial powers into one agency, saying it preferred to have a system that provides checks and balances so one organization cannot become too powerful.

Pinter said organized crime has become too entrenched to worry about checks and balances.

``Organized crime is too big to worry about one cop who might go astray,`` said Pinter, a former deputy sheriff who owns a commercial security firm in Hollywood.

Although he said the proposal has received the endorsement of the Broward County Chiefs of Police Association and many of the state`s police chiefs, he complained that Florida`s 20 state attorneys oppose the proposal because the commission, crossing county and jurisdictional lines, would be allowed to work in their districts.