

Unlikely as it might seem, St. Paul's top security cop is gaining the trust of some GOP convention protesters



REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton
Matt Bostrom, St. Paul's coordinator of security efforts for the Republican National convention, vows to do his best not to allow situations like this 2004 standoff between riot police and protesters at the 2004 Democratic Convention in Boston.

By Doug Grow
Friday, Dec. 7, 2007

They had come to challenge Matt Bostrom, but now the peace-and-justice activists were applauding him.

Bostrom — an assistant chief of the St. Paul police department who is charged with balancing law, order and the First Amendment during the Republican National Convention — was saying all the right things to the activists, most of whom plan to be on St. Paul streets during the convention.

There will be no police officers infiltrating protest organizations, Bostrom promised. Police will be in uniform, not war-like tactical gear, he said. There will be no contract cops, similar to the Blackwater security forces. St. Paul police, not the Secret Service, will be in charge of policing outside the convention site at Xcel Energy Center.



How can I

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"The city of St. Paul is a free-speech zone," Bostrom said. "I say that proudly. I was disappointed when I saw what Boston did (in handling protesters at the 2004 Democratic Convention). I don't understand this idea of putting people in a pen someplace so they can express themselves. That's not the way we will do things."

They came, they saw, they believed

That's when the peace-and-justice crowd, made up mostly of old-timers, started applauding the 46-year-old Bostrom.

He makes a big thing of the fact that he grew up in St. Paul, the son of a cop turned City Council member, Dan Bostrom. He's married to his Johnson High sweetheart. They've raised their kids in St. Paul. All of this means that he wants everyone — Republicans and those who will come to protest the Republicans' agenda — to have good feelings about St. Paul when they leave the city.

"When all of this is over, we want people to say there's a Minnesota model for handling this kind of event," Bostrom said.

Bostrom was handed the cop-in-charge designation by St. Paul Police Chief John Harrington shortly after it was announced that the Twin Cities would be the site of the Republican convention.

"Chief called me in and started saying all these nice things about me and then he says, 'Because of that, you take the lead on the convention.' My first thought was, 'This is a catastrophe.' But I've come to a different place. Now I see this as an opportunity."

Bostrom has become a student of how other police departments have handled the mass crowds that come with huge political events. He also is studying what's happening on college campuses as a way of gauging just how chaotic protests over the war and other issues might be. To date, the campuses have remained stunningly placid.

Bostrom happy to meet with protest groups

He also is open to meeting with any groups that plan to be involved in protests at the convention. His hope is that he can build a relationship of trust with key leaders long before the first protester takes the first step in the first march.

Ultimately, he even hopes that peaceful protesters will help police weed out "the knuckleheads" who show up in St. Paul with mayhem on their minds. He's gone so far as to suggest that maybe peaceful protestors can develop some subtle signals that will point police to those who are violating the law.

In this perfect world of trust and free speech, the 3,000 to 4,000 cops from throughout the metro area who will be working the convention will be greeting convention delegates and demonstrators alike with smiles and conversation. These cops, by the way, all will be trained and presumably paid with federal funds.

There are practical reasons for opening the convention with smiling cops on bicycles rather than in riot gear.

"As soon as officers put on that gear, they're not human anymore," Bostrom said in an interview. "It's much easier to throw a rock at

someone who isn't human than an officer in uniform."

So Plan A is to protect the First Amendment, demonstrators and police with a shield of trust.

Of course, there's a Plan B. Police will be carrying riot gear in the trunks of their cars. Officers will be trained to clear crowds that try to shut down the convention or turn lawless as happened at the World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference in Seattle in 1999.

Bostrom describes what happened in Seattle as "a perfect storm." The city was not prepared for the massive crowds of demonstrators. It was not ready to deal with the mind-twisting concept of organized anarchists. And it didn't have enough cops on the streets.

The ensuing riots ended up costing a chief of police and a mayor their jobs.

But the riots also overwhelmed the peaceful demonstrators whose messages were drowned out by those throwing rocks and burning cars.

That's why Bostrom believes he can work with demonstration leaders.

He believes the vast majority of demonstrators will come to St. Paul with peaceful intentions.

St. Paul cops will not start in a defensive mode. This will be no Boston, Bostrom said, where four years ago demonstrators were, as court rulings have ordered, in "sight and sound" of the Democratic National Convention. But that meant demonstrators were behind fences and under a freeway overpass. They were in sight and sound only if you had a keen eye and exceptional hearing.

Bostrom's Plan A looks good on paper.

Trust issue can easily unravel

But trust is a fragile thing, which is why Bostrom was irate earlier this summer when there was a report in the Star Tribune that the Ramsey County Sheriff's office was preparing to construct pens to hold upward of 5,000 people who might be arrested.

"An awful setback," said Bostrom of the impact of the pens on trust.

He's had numerous meetings with the sheriff's office and said that any plans that someone might have had to build holding pens never were viewed by him and have been erased, Bostrom said. But try telling that to the skeptics.

At a recent meeting, for example, one activist insisted he's even seen the pens on St. Paul's East Side.

Bostrom could only shake his head.

"No pens," he said to the man who was convinced he's seen the pens.

Later, Bostrom talked of how exasperating this single breakdown in communications with the sheriff's office has been.

"There's not a meeting I attend in which that doesn't come up," he said.

"There are people who are absolutely convinced there are these secret plans being made. I tell everyone (in law enforcement) that we can't even joke about this."

The simple fact is, no matter how many times Bostrom says, "Trust us," there is all sorts of skepticism.

Another huge stumbling block in the issue of trust is a section of St. Paul's city charter that does not allow the city to grant permits for demonstrations until 180 days before the scheduled event. How, leaders of various peace-and-justice organizations ask, can they effectively plan for the arrival of anywhere from 50,000 to 100,000 protesters without permits?

The American Civil Liberties Union of Minnesota is threatening legal action over that time restriction.

"You have 14,000 Republicans who have carte blanche on where they're going to hold meetings, where they're going to have meals and 100,000 people can't get a permit?" said Chuck Samuelson, executive director of Minnesota's ACLU. "How does that work?"

"There's nothing I can do about that," said Bostrom of the time restriction. "All I can say is that even if it's the day before the convention and some group comes to us wanting a permit, they're going to get it."

Not good enough, said Samuelson. The ACLU will continue to press for permits now, and it will keep a watchful eye on other potential problems with an army of 300 lawyers who are volunteering their time.

"We are going to insure that everybody has the right to exercise their free speech," said Samuelson.

There are other trust problems for Bostrom. No matter how much good will he personally builds with various organizations, there's a sense that in the final weeks leading up to the convention, the Secret Service will take charge of St. Paul's streets.

Bostrom insists that in his meetings with the Secret Service there's been no hint that that will happen.

"They will partner with St. Paul police," he said. "They want local government to handle issues of free speech. Their job is to protect top officials."

At that recent meeting with peace and justice leaders, Bostrom was pressed over and over about local police independence from the Secret Service.

"Will you resign if the Secret Service would take over?" Bostrom was asked.

"If that were to happen, I would resign," he said.

To date, Bostrom has shown he's a good listener and extremely patient. For instance, after a long, passionate speech about the "atrocities" committed by the Bush administration, a local career activist had this question:

"Why don't you arrest the criminals inside the convention center and stop worrying about the good people on the streets?"

After listening, without interrupting, Bostrom answered calmly. "So the question is, 'Why don't local police officers make arrests based on international law?' We don't have that authority."

There were more questions and the stunning applause. It all seems so reasonable now.

"But how to do this never came up on any police exam any of us ever took," Bostrom said.

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