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Case closed? Courtrooms may be shut during NATO, G-8 summits

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Civil courtrooms at the Daley Center — part of the nation's second-largest court system — could be closed for security reasons in the days surrounding the NATO and G-8 meetings, officials said Wednesday.

Temporarily shutting down the courtrooms would be a “smart move” to keep judges, jurors and attorneys safe, said Frank Bilecki, a spokesman for the Cook County Sheriff's office, which provides security for the Daley Center's courtrooms.

One of the first protest permits issued by the city sets the stage for a massive march May 19 from the Daley Center's plaza to McCormick Place, where President Barack Obama and other world leaders will meet May 19-21.

“There are discussions about closing the courtrooms at the Daley Center. It would be a smart move for security reasons — not just for the staff, but for people who have court cases, have jury duty and those who have to come and testify,” Bilecki said.

“If the protesters are going to be set up downtown and there's an incident and people can't get to their court cases or people can't get there to provide a fair and impartial jury, it can delay a court case and cause problems. Parking and public transportation could be impacted. Maybe the better decision is to close the courts for a few days,” Bilecki said.

Chief Cook County Judge Tim Evans said no final decision has been made.

“At this point, I expect court to be open in the Daley Center during the G8/NATO meetings unless the Public Building Commission decides to close the Daley Center. Additionally, it is logical to expect that some judges, whenever possible, might consider keeping their court calls light on days of scheduled demonstrations near the Daley Center,” Evans said in a prepared statement.

Mayor Rahm Emanuel chairs the commission, which runs the Daley Center.

The chief judge said he hopes to meet next week with Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez and other law enforcement officials at all levels to discuss how the summits will affect the Daley Center.

“After that meeting, we will be better able to advise the public what they can expect from the court system,” Evans said, adding, “Justice and safety are at the top of the court's priorities.”

A judge working in the Daley Center confirmed that rumors are rampant that the building will be closed. Some members of the judiciary are planning ahead, keeping calls light in the days leading to the meetings, the judge said.

The specter of closing the Daley Center's courtrooms was raised as sources disclosed that Chicago Police Supt. Garry McCarthy is talking about seeking 850 reinforcements to assist his officers facing off against possibly tens of thousands of protesters from across the nation and world.

McCarthy once served as operations chief for the New York City Police Department, which has extensive experience in crowd control, civil unrest and protection of visiting dignitaries.

Police spokesperson Melissa Stratton insisted Wednesday the city has not ruled out asking for help from police agencies outside the state.

But sources said McCarthy has told associates he hopes to limit his request for help to officers within Illinois.

Around 250 of those officers could come from the Illinois State Police. The remainder could be comprised of Cook County sheriff's police and officers from suburban and Downstate municipalities.

Sources told the Sun-Times that McCarthy initially requested the bulk of the 850 reinforcements come from the state police. He was forced to lower his sights after he was told the state police could not spare that many officers and juggle other responsibilities such as patrolling state expressways and tollways.

Yet another wrinkle is what to do with the potential for hundreds of arrested protesters. Currently, Cook County Jail is at 97 percent capacity, with a population of more than 9,250 detainees — far above normal for winter, Bilecki said. That population is expected to grow as temperatures rise. Another 1,100 detainees are on electronic monitoring, he said.

If mass detentions are needed, there are only so many places to put those arrested. They could include McCormick Place East or the Old Post Office, sources said.

It was not immediately clear why McCarthy, according to sources, is hesitant to ask for out of state help. But cost may have something to do with it. Officers from outside Illinois would have to be fed and put up in hotels. Officers from the suburbs could go home at night.

Meanwhile, Fraternal Order of Police President Mike Shields has said repeatedly that experts have told him a force of 5,000 would be needed to control an international onslaught of protesters.

With only 3,057 face shields ordered for Chicago police officers and 850 reinforcements from outside the city, that would leave the department more than 1,000 officers short of that the FOP's 5,000 benchmark.

"The city hasn't finalized the number of sworn officers needed for the summits," said Stratton, the police spokeswoman, arguing that releasing the number of reinforcements would constitute a "security breach."

"We are still assessing our needs," Stratton said. "Final operations plans aren't set."