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Published November 26th, 2008

Moraga's Police Chief Leaves to Return to His Roots

By Sophie Braccini



Chief Ruppenthal by his favorite Norman Rockwell painting Photo Sophie Braccini

Twenty nine years; now that's a long term relationship. That's the time Mark Ruppenthal spent in Moraga enforcing the law in a town he loves. That bond will be severed by Thanksgiving, as Mark Ruppenthal, Moraga Chief of Police, will leave his post to return to the agency that offered him his first job: the East Bay Regional Parks Police (EBRPP).

Ruppenthal started to explore law enforcement as a cadet for the Moraga Police when he was a junior at Campolindo High School. After graduation from U.C. Davis, his first job as a police officer was offered to him in 1974 by the EBRPP. "They are not Rangers," explains Ruppenthal, "they are the police department of the parks." The Parks force is an impressive group of 69 officers, using anything from a quad to a helicopter, boat, a motorcycle or a horse to police the 65 different parks over a 1,500 square mile area, covering all of Alameda and Contra Costa Counties.

In 1979 Moraga transferred the management of its police from the County to EBRPP. The Town hired its own officers, and the agency provided a part time chief and administrative support. Having been raised in Lamorinda, Ruppenthal volunteered to staff the new force. Since then, the Moraga entity became completely independent and Ruppenthal's career evolved steadily to the role of Chief. "I thought I was going to retire here when the offer came to me," affirms

Ruppenthal, "I love Moraga, I love policing a small community; I'm leaving because I got an offer from my agency of origin that I couldn't refuse." The Moraga Chief will be second in command of the East Bay Park force. He will at last be an administrator, a function that was hard to work into the demanding schedule in Moraga.

With a police force of 13, and three officers out in long term disability (but still paid by the town), the Chief had to do more than his share. "In Moraga I was a police officer, a clerk, a mechanic," says the Chief with a big smile, "but I wouldn't trade my time here for anything."

Working with strained resources has taken its toll on the Chief even though he says he got used to the hardship. "The Council is in a difficult situation with a tight budget and a strong commitment to security," he says. Over the years Ruppenthal has always enjoyed a very good relationship with the town's elected officials and the Town Manager, and he says the Town will soon have to make some hard choices. "They will have to choose between the nice-to-have and the got-to-have. In my opinion, public safety is a got-to-have."

The Chief believes that the Moraga Police Department needs to be funded at the level it deserves. "The schools have a Foundation and the Fire District has the Rescue One Foundation, the police need to have additional funding as well." Ruppenthal is not necessarily favorable to a "Police Foundation" though. "It is only human, but if someone contributes \$1000 to the police department they could be prone to consider it a 'get out of jail' card," he warns. Other solutions could include a joint force with Orinda and Lafayette. "The Council needs to give that direction for us to study it." Ruppenthal highlights that there is already a lot of synergy between the three departments and that Lafayette and Orinda are studying such alternatives, not just with Moraga at this time. The Chief comments too that the discussion needs to continue with St Mary's to determine what the College's fair contribution should be to the Police Department.

"What I am going to miss is my involvement, the interaction with a small community," adds Ruppenthal, with a tinge of regret in his voice. He says he is leaving the department in good hands: Lieutenant Robert Priebe, who joined the Moraga Police Department at the same time as himself, will take the helm as interim Chief. The new Town Manager, when he is hired, will decide whether to make that position permanent or recruit a new Chief. To the question of whether he thinks that Priebe should be the next Chief, Ruppenthal replies, "Bob has all the capabilities in the world and that's why I recommended him as Chief."

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