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Underage Drinking-A Top Priority for the OPD

By Andrea A. Firth

"We have zero tolerance for underage drinking. We take this very seriously," stated Chief Bill French of the Orinda Police Department (OPD) in his comments to the Orinda City Council on Tuesday, October 20. The Council asked the Chief to revisit the City's existing ordinance regulating illegal or unruly private parties to determine if more could be done to address the issue of underage drinking in the community.

Underage drinking and the real and potentially lethal consequences of it have received significant attention in Orinda over the past six months, and the OPD has twice pursued complaints through the District Attorney's (DA's) office for the unruly party ordinance. The first incident involved several college-aged individuals at a private residence in the Orinda Downs area. Four young people were issued citations for 'minor in possession of an alcoholic beverage,' and one citation was issued to the 20 year-old host of the party. The second most recent party involved several young people at a private residence in the Happy Valley area. Seven high school students were issued citations for driving under the influence, possession of an alcoholic beverage, and possession of marijuana. Charges against three parents are also being sought. Both matters are pending adjudication with the DA's office.

"The ordinance is an excellent tool for us to use when we respond to unruly teenage parties," explained French, who did not feel the current ordinance required further updating. "If we respond to a party and underage kids are drinking, we will cite them." French went on to explain that if a parent allows a child to host a party, and there is a reasonable belief that alcohol will be there, the parents are at risk for being charged and prosecuted for a misdemeanor as well. (See sidebar, Section 9.24.020 Orinda Municipal Code.) "This issue really has gotten the attention of the District Attorney," stated French.

The practical challenge of catching kids in the act of drinking is another facet to the problem. "With the technology available today, the high school kids often know we are coming to break up a party," says French. The unruly party ordinance was revised in May of 2007 to apply to a gathering of two or more persons, down from the previous requirement of five party-goers needing to be present, due to the high schoolers proclivity to quickly scatter.

Council Member Steve Glazer described a frustration among some parents in the community regarding the follow through on consequences associated with being caught drinking underage. Chief French explained that while the OPD has a good working relationship with the School District and the principal at Miramonte High School, the Department is prohibited by law from sharing the names of students, under the age of 18, and what they are arrested for and charged with. Although a student may sign a sport or other extracurricular activity waiver stating that they will lose the opportunity to participate if they drink alcohol or use other illegal substances, the School District may not be privy to this information and unable to enforce the waiver.

There is some good news, according to French. "We do find kids at parties who don't drink. Perhaps they are designated drivers, or they honor the sports contract they signed, or they make this a personal choice," he says.

"The solution may be to find out what compels those kids not to drink."

Chief French will be part of the community forum, Underage Drinking in Our Community, Myths and Realities sponsored by the Miramonte High School Parents Club Healthy Choices Committee. "It's a topic that needs to be addressed as a result of recent incidents in our community," says Jamie Zaffanella, co-coordinator of the Healthy Choices Program. "We hope to inform and educate parents and emphasize what a key role they continue to play. It's a big issue, and we as a community need to address it together."

(Editor's note: The Underage Drinking forum was scheduled for Tuesday, October 27th, after press time. Look for a brief summary on our website this week, www.lamorindaweekly.com, and complete coverage in our next issue.)

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