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Police Department's Challenges

By Sophie Braccini

Moraga used to claim 13 police officer positions; now the number is 11. "We were never at 13," says Chief of Police Robert Priebe, "our department has suffered an unsustainable turnover rate (183% over the last 11 years), and we are now at 10 with an 11th officer in the recruitment process." The Chief says the staffing issue is due to insufficient funding. But with a reorganized force that will now include a detective position, and a new financial package being negotiated with the Town, he hopes to stabilize his force to keep and even develop his officers in town.

"There are different factors that contribute to the financial pressure we are under," explains Priebe, "our force has committed to be part of a global communication system that was designed after the shortfalls noticed during the Oakland fire. That participation comes with the need for our department to install expensive radio equipment in all our cars and to subscribe to the monthly maintenance of this equipment." Faced with the capital expense, Priebe proposed to use the State of California's "COPS" (Citizen's Options for Public Safety) allocation to buy equipment rather than finance the 13th officer that was a COPS-funded position

According to Priebe, the high turn-over rate puts an additional financial burden on the Town. "When we lose an officer it takes time to recruit a new person, get that person through all the mandatory checks and the additional 14-week training period," says Priebe, "during the interim, other officers have to work overtime, which costs the Town more." The chief estimates that cost at about \$83,000, and adds that this figure does not take into account the loss of experience in the department and the increased fatigue of the officers.

Priebe explains that the reason officers leave is financial. "The retirement plan in Moraga is currently a '2 at 50' system, meaning that an officer who retires at 50 years of age would receive a pension equivalent to 2 percent of the average of his best three years multiplied by his total number of years worked." Other jurisdictions operated under a similar plan but at 3% rather than 2%. "The Town has been negotiating a new plan with the officers," said Priebe, "the negotiations are not over yet, but I have heard very positive feedback so far."

Priebe's plan is to function with a force of 11: 1 Chief, 1 Lieutenant, 1 Detective, 1 Sergeant and 7 Officers. "Once we have bought all our equipment and if the State continues to fund 'COPS', we will be able to open a 12th position." Priebe believes that residents will not be able to overlook the long term cost of sustaining a stable police force. "The Fire Department had to levy a parcel tax," concludes Priebe, "if Moraga cannot generate more revenue through other means, may be such a revenue source will have to be established for the Police Department."

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