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## New Police Chief Seeks a Community Partnership

By Cathy Tyson



Police Chief Eric Christensen Photo Cathy Tyson

In office for about a month so far, Lafayette Police Chief Eric Christensen recently sat down for a wide-ranging interview about his new job. The friendly and engaging Christensen has ambitious plans for the department and is excited about serving the citizens of Lafayette. Having previously worked in San Ramon as a Patrol Deputy and Detective, as a Supervising Sergeant for Oakley, and most recently as manager of the County Emergency Services Support unit, the Chief brings a unique skill set to this position.

He reports that traffic and complaints related to traffic are the number one concern of residents. When someone complains of speeders in the neighborhood, Christensen makes a point of having officers check it out to analyze the extent of the problem and looks at what the department can do to change behavior. "When tickets go up, the number of accidents goes down," he said. Call it a deterrent, but he's found that people really do think twice when they've been ticketed. "We are here to make the community safer."

When he first started the job, City Manager Steven Falk suggested the Chief go out and meet people, and more than a couple of drivers were surprised to be introduced to their new police chief when he was on patrol.

In his prior position working for Emergency Services Support, coordinating with other agencies was a key aspect of the job and it's clear he's brought that collaborative point of view to Lafayette. That philosophy is manifested in the new motto for the department: "A community partnership." Looking to foster the support of the community, police rely on attentive residents and business owners who are keenly aware of unusual or suspicious activity to report tips. "That's the best crime fighting tool we have," said Christensen.

A second aspect of this partnership is the recently launched volunteer program in the Police Department. Together with the Crime Prevention Committee, the Department is actively encouraging residents to volunteer a few hours a week doing manageable tasks that would free

up officers to increase the level of service around Lafayette.

The plan is to craft a short citizen's police academy seminar and possibly organize a field trip to the Martinez Detention Facility as a brief overview to educate volunteers on how the police serve the public.

Sean Larson, a professional in his thirties who helped out at Chief Christensen's last post, will be volunteering to help manage the Lafayette patrol fleet. Specifically, he'll be helping to clean the vehicles and making sure all the many pieces of equipment are complete-one less task for officers. With a limited budget, the idea is to stretch resources and fill a few hours per week with community service helpers.

While Christensen looks forward to welcoming incoming volunteers, he cautioned, "There's a major vetting process - we don't want untrustworthy people in the police department." Plan on a background check, being fingerprinted, and taking a polygraph. His own mother volunteered in the past; Christensen opined that she passed the tests.

Finally, the community partnership theme continues with the Chief directing officers to get to know all the bank managers and staffers downtown, creating a relationship. The goal of this is to explain what will happen in the, hopefully unlikely, event a bank gets robbed, to give personnel a comfort level of how police will respond to that type of situation. Ditto for the night-time patrols - they are required to meet and greet all the establishments that serve alcohol. If there happens to be a call for service, bar owners will be familiar with the protocol.

Parting advice? Christensen recommends making your house number clearly visible from the street. "If I can't find your house, I can't help you - same with fire and emergency personnel." In Lafayette the police see many crimes of opportunity, an unlocked car with a purse or laptop in plain view is an invitation. Given how safe residents generally feel, he warns against complacency. "There's nothing you can do to get your sense of security back once your home or car has been broken into." It's worth a couple of minutes to make sure doors and windows are locked. To report suspicious activity call the office number at (925) 299-3220 or dispatch at (925) 284-5010, and of course, in case of emergency, dial 911.

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