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Police to Get New Computers in Patrol Cars

By Cathy Tyson

What a difference a decade makes. Because the 10-year-old computers in police cars are way past their prime, Lafayette Police Chief Eric Christensen recently asked the City Council to release funds to upgrade technology for shiny, new Mobile Data Computers (MDC) that do a substantially better job of communicating with other agencies, ultimately providing better service to residents.

These productivity tools will greatly improve the effectiveness of police, allowing them to maximize their time on the mean streets of Lafayette. Now in order to write up a report, an officer has to leave the scene of an incident and return to the station to write up what happened. "Over the past two months, I have had the opportunity to personally observe the impact of this upon the efficiency of the Police Department," said Christensen. He estimates that officers spend roughly 30 percent of their shift yo-yoing to a call and back to the office to complete reports. The new MDCs will allow police to write up a report from a patrol car and electronically send it in, similar to an iPad or iPhone, but with more bells and whistles.

Another selling point of the new and vastly improved computers is the identification components of the system. The Mobile ID program, about the size of a lipstick, can take a subject's fingerprint and transmit the image via the new MDC to connect with the County Identification Bureau to compare with records on file.

Finally, the old models don't support the Automated Regional Information Exchange System (ARIES) - a system that shares records, parole data, photographs, mugshots and more - the new computers do.

How much is this going to cost? The Chief has requested a maximum of $60,000 from the Police Vehicle Replacement Sinking Fund. That account currently has a balance just short of $350,000. Monthly service fees should be less than $40 per month per computer.

"The computers include a touch screen monitor, the processor and the modem systems that allow us to access the County law network," said Christensen. Contra Costa County has an existing contract, and the City of Lafayette can take advantage of savings by piggy-backing on their economy of scale. The request was unanimously approved by the City Council.

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