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Does Moraga Need More Police Officers?

By Sophie Braccini



Police Chief Robert Priebe Photo Sophie Braccini

Frank Melón is a persistent individual; the general manager of the Moraga Country Club came to the Moraga Town Council's goal setting session Jan.14 to ask, for the second year in a row, that police services be reinforced in Moraga. The Town Council agreed that the time has come to look into the issue.

"The average number of police officers is one per 1,000 residents," Melón told the Town Council. "That would mean there should be 16 officers in Moraga."

Moraga's budget currently allows for 13 officers but the town has had an average of 11 officers at any one time during the last three years.

Police Chief Robert Priebe knows these numbers well. "Moraga ties for the lowest number of police officers per 1,000 residents in Contra Costa County, with a ratio of 0.7," he said, "and Moraga is the absolute last if you look at police cost per resident, at \$142.07."

With officers on duty 24 hours per day, seven days per week, having less than 14 means that someone has to work overtime; and it gets worse when an officer goes on vacation or is out sick or injured. "Some officers say they like overtime when I hire them," said Priebe, who always discloses the situation to new recruits, "but after a while, over-working takes its toll."

Moraga's police department always seems to be in the process of recruiting new officers and losing others. Priebe thinks that salaries below the region's average and reduced benefit packages are not the only reasons for the high turnover. "When someone joins

the police they want the excitement, they want the chase and to catch the bad guys," he said. "Here we have a different kind of policing - more prevention, more making sure that everyone stays safe. It is not enough for some of the officers." Priebe is nonetheless proud that the young officers who are trained in Moraga do very well and quickly advance in their careers when they go somewhere else.

Priebe said that 16 officers would be an ideal number for his department. He explained that he has never lobbied for additional staff because that it is a decision the community has to make and that other departments in town should be considered as well. "This community needs to look at the level of service it deserves, and how it's going to pay for it in the future," said Priebe. "We don't have a big revenue base, and probably never will, for a combination of reasons." The cost of having three additional officers in Moraga is roughly \$360,000 - \$65 per each of Moraga's 5,500 housing units.

The recent increase in home burglaries, including at the Moraga Country Club where a private patrol service augments police, may have spurred the Town Council's decision to consider police staffing levels - but Priebe cannot guarantee that more police would mean less crime. "It's like an insurance policy. As your family grows, your assets grow, you reassess your insurance needs," he said. "Communities do just that. They need to take a really hard look and determine if they are underinsured or properly insured."

Town Goals

Moraga's goals for 2014 revolve around four key elements:

Maintain excellence in stewardship.

Maximize existing resources for enhanced community use through partnerships and agreements.

Celebrate the town's 40th anniversary around the Pear and Wine Festival.

Enable the organization to respond to opportunities as they arise.

A detailed list of the goals can be found on the town's website, www.moraga.ca.us (although they should eventually be easier to find, as of our press deadline the goals were listed under the Town Council Jan. 14 Special Agenda). Read the related article that appeared in our Jan. 1 issue, available in our archive at www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0722/Moragas-New-Mayor-Ken-Chew.html.

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