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## Learning What Police Officers Really Do

*By Cathy Tyson*

It was a full house in the conference room of the Lafayette city offices for the second of six meetings of the Citizen's Police Academy. A cross section of a dozen eager residents representing the Rotary, the Chamber of Commerce, City Council, Oakwood Athletic Club and more came looking for a better understanding of the police department and the particulars of local law enforcement. Police Chief Eric Christensen spearheaded the program, which was developed by members of the police department and the Crime Prevention Commission. This is the first roll out of the series of classes, which will be fine tuned and presumably offered again later this year. So far, it seems to be working; attendees were engaged and had lots of opportunities to question, comment and learn. It's a significant time commitment. Students are required to have a background check, then attend each three-hour session and complete a two-hour ride along with an officer in a patrol car. The initial session was an overview of the criminal justice system, followed up with last week's traffic and patrol operations session. In the coming weeks there are classes on police investigations, use of force, crime lab overview and tour, and a jail visit, culminating with an optional session at a firearms range along with a barbecue lunch. Graduation will occur at a council meeting.

With 23 full- and part-time personnel, which includes 17 sworn officers who are contracted through the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office, available 24/7 every day of the year, it's nice to know that these brave men and women take the job seriously, but still have a sense of humor.

Kicking off the traffic meeting was a video of a very irate driver being ticketed, with a fair amount of "bleeped" bad language. Professional and congenial Sergeant Dan Nugent, main instructor for the evening, called it just another day at the office. His over-arching theme: "Traffic enforcement lessens traffic accidents. Our goal is to make people safe - that's it." He continued, "A ticket is a reminder to change behavior with a kicker - a fine."

Officer Neil Black, the citation king of the department with a whopping 1,100 citations for 2014, talked about what it's like to be a motorcycle cop and what the strategies are. Fellow officer Jerry Shaman also helped out with the class, describing his experiences on the job.

The class touched on a number of traffic-related topics including directing traffic, bicyclists and bike lanes, along with bad biker behavior, pedestrian right of way, and the risk/reward calculation that goes into authorizing a high speed chase. To illustrate that point, a video from the dashboard camera of a police cruiser was shown in hot pursuit on Highway 24 and along Happy Valley Road, sirens and lights blazing at 4 a.m. As suspected, it did not end well for the driver of a stolen truck who was on drugs.

After hearing complaints from students about less than courteous bicyclists, Nugent - who referred to them as "Spandex warriors" - clarified that they are supposed to ride single file, not two and three abreast. He said the department wants them to obey the law, encouraging their compliance by writing up tickets that can cost \$500 for running a red light or "impeding traffic."

The night shift sees all kinds of colorful behavior. "After 10 p.m. booze is usually involved somehow," explained Nugent, citing bar fights, DUIs, domestic violence - even teenagers stealing alcohol from grocery stores.

The highlight of the evening was riding in squad cars down Mt. Diablo Boulevard, learning the nuances of a traffic stop and ways police try to protect themselves, and even how to light flares.

"Very interesting!" said Robin Fox.

Council Member Traci Reilly is also a student; she was formerly on the Crime Prevention Commission and wanted a better understanding of the department. It's the biggest budget item the city pays for, so she was eager to participate. .

She describes the classes as "very impressive so far."

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