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Local Community Court Will Help First-time Offenders

By Sophie Braccini

Some low-level crimes in Lamorinda will soon be diverted from the Contra Costa County criminal courts and managed through a new Community Court system. This agreement with the District Attorney's Office is set to ease congestion in the county judicial system, and as of recently, the three local cities are now set up to move forward.

A Community Court provides a voluntary non-criminal alternative for first-time offenders of minor crimes. Hearings are conducted by trained, licensed attorneys acting as hearing officers. They may issue a directive including a fine, community service or counseling. When the participant completes the directive, the case is discharged. The program is voluntary and the offender - as well as the victim, if there is one - can opt out at any time during the process.

Moraga interim Town Manager Bob Priebe said that there are about 40 cases a year in Moraga for this type of proceeding. "People can make mistakes, and that can follow them for a long time," said Priebe. "This process gives the person a chance to not have a conviction on their record." He gave the example of a Saint Mary's College student arrested while drunk, a conviction that could hurt that student going on to graduate school. Through the Community Court system, the suspect could be ordered to do community service, and nothing would show up on future records. The Orinda City Council was the first one to approve the concept last December. Then on April 14, the Moraga Town Council approved its participation in it. Lafayette Chief of Police Eric Christensen confirmed that Lafayette will participate in the program, and that the agreement with the D.A.'s office about the guidelines of the program will be signed in the near future.

Christensen said he thinks that the program will have some benefits for the community and will piggy-back well on the Lafayette current diversion program that is used for juvenile offenders in the community. He said that the cases that Lafayette will be sending to that new court are nuisance style of crimes that have been vetted through the Lafayette process. He also said that convicted criminals will not be eligible for the program.

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