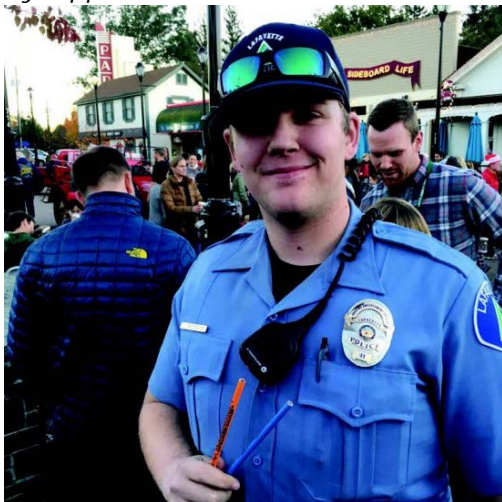


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Behind the scenes - protecting Lafayette's community events

By Pippa Fisher



A Lafayette Police Officer smiles at a recent Lafayette event. Photo provided

Lafayette residents enjoy a great community known for being family-friendly and safe, giving little thought to how the many community events are protected - simply taking for granted that they are safe. And that's just fine with Lafayette Police Chief Eric Christensen.

Prior to this year's Res Run, for example, residents might not have noticed the bomb-sniffing dogs and their handlers checking the entire route, or the drone checking the rooftops.

"We've done a security plan on large scale events for the last five years," says Christensen. "You probably never noticed it, which is a good thing. I don't know when something is going to happen, but my boss (the city manager) expects that we are prepared to handle it if it does."

Lafayette city leaders do not have the attitude that "it can't happen here" and Christensen says that guides all the planning for large community events. He explains that for events such as the Res Run or the Art and Wine

Festival, which attract a large number of people from outside the community, the police publish an Incident Action Plan for the event. "The plan tells all of the responders what is going on and what we are going to do if something happens."

Christensen says that in 2012, following a number of incidents where people had driven into crowds at that time, the police started requiring that K-Rail barricades be used to protect any street when people are expected to gather.

"In 2013, we started having bomb dogs go through our larger events, because of bombing incidents. In 2014, we added the requirements to have vehicles blocking all of the roads so no one could ram through - we also added aerial over-flights to look for people on roofs, etc. We have added using the drone, but that's because we now have that technology here for us to use. Prior to every big event, we ask for an analysis of the event by our friends at the FBI and our local intelligence unit."

Christensen explained that the police plan for all types of potential incidents during public events. "Medical problems, snipers, bombing, fire, all the things that could occur - so we have a plan to start with."

Christensen notes that in Lafayette the Public Safety Committee also plays a big part in readiness and planning. He says that members of the committee, including council members Cam Burks and Ivor Samson, are all part of the "public safety team" and play an active role in operations, especially during large-scale events.

"I'll admit it, when I report to some people about what we do they roll their eyes," the chief acknowledges. "A great example is the drone flyovers. We use a FLIR (thermal imaging) device on our drone to survey all of the rooftops and the areas that overlook the public event. I do this so I know there is no one that can cause harm."

But he says, "The day after the Las Vegas shooting I got an email from one of the organizers of the Art and Wine Festival thanking us for being proactive in our security plan."

Together with the PSC, Christensen says they continue to look for ways in which they can be better prepared. Three weeks before the North Bay fires, Lafayette hosted an evacuation workshop. "One of my current concerns raised by the North Bay fires is vulnerable populations. FEMA estimates that 30 percent of people will need assistance in getting out during an evacuation. We are currently developing a local registry where people who know they are going to need help can tell us up front - so we know where to send help when we need to evacuate an area."

Pointing for examples to the Las Vegas shooting and the North Bay fires, Christensen says the police need to develop a better way to communicate with the public. "We have now begun testing different ways that we can use public address systems to tell a crowd (public gatherings) and a neighborhood (community alerting) what to do. In a crowd, I need to be able to tell people what to do and where to go. In a neighborhood, I

have to be able to wake people up with a mobile siren system and tell them to get out."

Christensen says his officers react to incidents as they occur as well. "On Halloween, we have some streets with a lot of kids on them. After the New York thing, we added some officers to various areas of the city for the night," he said, referring to a driver who ploughed into a crowd in New York City just hours earlier on the same day. "I am fortunate that we have the flexibility to do this."

Community events provide the police with a great opportunity for training using all their resources. "When we use things like the drone, we get more familiar and proficient with the equipment. That makes us better when we need to use the equipment for an emergency."

Burks appreciates such a proactive chief. "He is innovative and pragmatic and I continue to be impressed with the skills and subject matter expertise he brings to the table, commensurate with the evolving security environment. He manages the safety of our community exceptionally well and he has my complete confidence."

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