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Lafayette Police Department recruits four-legged help

By Pippa Fisher



The Lafayette City Council voted unanimously in favor of setting up a police canine program at their Oct. 15 meeting.

Although some canines are trained for a single purpose, law enforcement most commonly uses dual-purpose dogs trained in tracking (missing persons as well as criminals), and in firearms/explosives detection.

Lafayette Police Chief Ben Alldritt told the council that he became aware of the advantages of the newer dual-purpose canines during the Art and Wine Festival when the Pittsburg Police Department assisted the Lafayette police with the morning "sweep" for explosives before opening the event to the public.

Police Chief Ben Alldritt presents his case to the council for starting a K-9 program at the Oct. 15 meeting. Photo Jeff Heyman, City of Lafayette

Alldritt explained that these canines can detect approximately 25-27 different explosive material scents including gunpowder, gun oils, and gun residue, dynamite, nitrate-based explosives, fuses/fuse caps, and detonating cords. Pittsburg PD has used its dogs for public events and to detect guns in vehicles.

In previous years Lafayette had two dual-purpose canines (tracking and narcotics) over two separate periods, but the program was discontinued. According to the staff report, "The program was discontinued based on a cost/benefit ratio. Narcotics are an issue in all communities, but in Lafayette, it is not as significant. The prior canines tended to be requested by outside agencies for suspected narcotics cases. Outside agency requests can be a drain on resources on a small agency, and the previous chief decided to discontinue the program."

Given the number of active shooter events affecting California and the country, Alldritt said that school safety, public event safety and religious institution safety continues to be a priority. He noted that with the increased focus on these areas, coupled with the decriminalization/reduction of crime severity for controlled substances, he thinks that within the next few years local law enforcement K-9 programs will transition from dual-purpose narcotics dogs to dual-purpose explosive detection canines.

"I am excited for us to have the opportunity to be on the cutting edge for this," said Alldritt as he explained how the demand for these canines has grown.

The cost of getting the program up and running is roughly \$70,000, with \$33,000 coming from a recently-established nonprofit, Lafayette Police Foundation, formed as a result of residents offering financial support for the program, and the rest coming from the city's budget.

City Council Member Cam Burks says that this is one of the most important votes the city has taken in a long time.

"Throughout my previous career in law enforcement all over the world, I've personally witnessed K-9s save hundreds of people, from kids to seniors, and protect police officers during search warrants, traffic stops, workplace violence events, earthquakes, school shootings and other crises."

Burks says that you can't put a price tag on this program. "Lafayette will be substantively safer and I commend Chief Alldritt for his innovative, forward thinking around how to sustainably fund the initiative through the creation of our first Lafayette Police Foundation, and the generosity of multiple Lafayette donors."

The canine will be assigned to an existing officer, selected from within the police department. Alldritt says several officers are interested. The dog and officer will work a daytime shift to maximize availability to schools. and public events.

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