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Orinda begins conversation on policing

By Sora O'Doherty

Emphasizing that this is only the beginning of the conversation, the Orinda city council opened a forum on policing policies in the city in response to numerous communications received from the public. During the COVID-19 pandemic, all city meetings are held via the Zoom conferencing platform. Chief of Police David Cook submitted a video and was available by telephone to respond to the council and the public.

Cook began by extending his sympathy and condolences to the family of George Floyd, and added, "Let me be unequivocal in stating, I condemn the actions of the officer Chauvin and the officers who stood by and allowed it to happen. These actions have no place in law enforcement and are not reflective of how our officers or the deputy sheriffs of the office of sheriff do their job." Cook reviewed the hiring requirements of the Contra Costa Sheriff's Office, from which Orinda draws its police officers, and offered personal reflections on his training at the Sherman-Block Supervisory Leadership Academy, a course spread over eight months, that he said was foundational for him.

The police chief also offered praise for the organizers of the June 6 Black Lives Matter demonstration in Orinda, Neil and Tanya Pretlow, who also spoke at the meeting, and Cook spoke about the use of force by Orinda police, and responded to comments.

Nicole Reader asked if the council had reviewed the Police Scorecard for Contra Costa County, which, she pointed out, gave the County Sheriff's Office a grade of F. "In 100% of the fatal shootings by our sheriff's department, they did not first attempt to use less lethal force," she reported. "Also, in 70% of the interactions where our sheriff's department killed or seriously injured someone, the injured person was unarmed." She concluded, "Finally, our sheriff's department was six times as likely to use deadly force on an African-American person than a white person."

Reader and others asked the council to commit to a four-part pledge espoused by President Barak Obama: review your police use of force policies; engage your communities by including a diverse range of input, experiences, and stories in your review; report the findings of your review to your community and seek feedback; and reform your

community's police use of force policies. Mayor Darlene Gee said that Orinda is undertaking the four steps of the Obama Pledge. City attorney Osa Wolff reminded the council that they could only discuss what is on an agenda, and recommended a future noticed meeting to comply with the Brown Act.

A number of speakers sought data on the actions of the Orinda police department in regards to racial and mental health stops and arrests, as well as more information on the use of body cameras by the OPD. Cook said that the police do not track statistics on mental health calls received, but added that the OPD wants to be of assistance to the community and that it would not be appropriate to send in a social worker alone where someone is acting out. Cook also said that the OPD is a unit of the Contra Costa Sheriff's Office, so it is that office that tracks statistics.

Orinda officers do not currently wear body cameras, and it was suggested that the city determine the cost of implementing such a program. When asked about the mutual aid agreements and if Orinda officers were pulled away to assist at demonstrations in Oakland, Cook responded that there are two types of mutual aid agreements, a local day-to-day agreement between Orinda, Lafayette, Moraga and the Sheriff's Office, and the actual mutual-aid agreement managed by the Sheriff's Office. Cook explained that Orinda officers did not go to the aid of Oakland, but in fact had increased staffing in Orinda at the time.

The mayor thanked the public for its interest, saying that the city had received hundreds of emails. "We will take steps to move the topic forward," she promised.

Neil Pretlow expressed his gratitude for being invited and allowed to speak and voice concerns and recommendations for continuing the work together. "Orinda holds a very special place in my heart, despite the difficulties I faced growing up here," he said. The mayor said she was very happy that Pretlow chose to come back to Orinda. She acknowledged that Pretlow's involvement means that Orinda can create a community "that we can be proud of," she said, and concluded, "We want Miles [Pretlow's young son] to grow up in a community that all of us are proud of, fair and equitable and provides everything equally to all of our residents."

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