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Lafayette police chief updates council on crime rates, emergency preparedness

By Lou Fancher



Photo courtesy Lafayette Police Department

Summarizing 2020, a year that saw a global pandemic, systemic public health and safety disparities and social justice protests leading to calls for police reform at local and national levels following the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in Minneapolis - among other unarmed Black men and women killed or critically injured last year by police - Lafayette Police Chief Ben Alldritt's annual report included local crime rates and important information about community emergency preparedness.

While adjusting to the challenges of safely delivering service to the community and maintaining a healthy work force during COVID-19, Alldritt reported the department responded to 14,000 calls for service and filed 1,300 reports. Violent crimes continued to track at low rates (the 2020 yearly total was 292; the highest in a 10-year comparison was 517 in 2015). An uptick in

armed and strong-armed robbery (5 and 6 incidents, respectively) and commercial burglary (28 crimes) and drops in residential burglaries to 9 from 22 burglaries in 2019, were the most notable. Alldritt said police department and business-owned cameras in the downtown core provided effective coverage that helped solve some of the burglary cases. Lower residential burglaries he attributed to more people working from home during the pandemic.

After last year's devastating wildfire season and just one week before an early red flag warning was announced (May 3) for a large area of Northern California from Shasta Dam to just north of Los Banos, Alldritt's presentation with updates about the Emergency Preparedness Commission's activities received critical attention. The last time the National Weather Service issued a red flag warning in early May for Northern California's interior was in 2014.

Referencing two public safety power shutoffs during 2020, Chief Alldritt said the department's generators were successfully deployed to provide power at several key traffic intersections. Pleased with the city of Lafayette's emergency operations plan, he shared credit for wildfire safety improvements with the community. Out of Lafayette's 10,000 households, Contra Costa County Community Warning System (CWS) data shows that in 2019, approximately 2,900 households had signed up for CWS. At the end of 2020, signups had increased to 8,688. Alldritt said it demonstrated "a huge growth."

As with crime solving, cameras placed under the ALERTWildfire program - close to 30 installed by the Lafayette Police Department, he indicated - are collectively an instrumental component of public safety when it comes to wildfires. Additionally, establishing the community's own FCC-licensed radio station that transmits emergency information 24/7 throughout the area on AM 1670, Alldritt said, provides real time updates during wildfire emergencies, power outages and other disasters.

Mayor Susan Candell in a question following council members' inquiries about specific crime statistics, asked Alldritt to provide information about a \$250,000 grant recently received by the department. The State of California Office of Emergency Services in 2019 and 2020 offered opportunity for public safety departments to apply for grants related to power resiliency. "I did submit a grant request in 2019 but didn't get it; but in 2020, we did," Alldritt said. "We received a check from the State of California of just shy of \$250,000."

Specifically, the items included in the grant request addressed improvements such as solar panels and a generator backup for the public works center to increase efficacy during emergencies. The chief also partnered with Acalanes Union School District Superintendent John Nickerson to apply for separate funds to purchase additional radios. The radios will be placed at school sites and on school buses and connect to public safety radio towers operated in Alameda and Contra Costa County by the East Bay Regional Communications System (EBRCS).

Alldritt told the council, "(This) means every Lafayette school site and all city department sites will be supported by the same service the police department uses." He said that with the additional radios, schools can reach out to each other during emergencies, city emergency centers will communicate more efficiently, and the police department can monitor the channel or coordinate with the county sheriff's office to dispatch assistance if necessary. Multiple backups to the channel ensures that even in a disaster, communication will be reliable. If for some reason the entire EBRCS system breaks down, Alldritt said it would mean the disaster is so dire that regardless of radio communications, "we're all in trouble."

Expectedly, response from the council and public comments regarding Alldritt's success in funding additional safety measures for Lafayette were congratulatory. A special city council meeting regarding wildfire preparedness, featuring presentations by Contra Costa Fire Protection District, Lamorinda CERT, Lafayette Emergency Preparedness Commission, and Lafayette PD will be held at 7 p.m. May 17 via Zoom webinar.

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