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Lafayette Motorcycle Cops Make a Dent in Driver Behavior

By Cathy Tyson



Photo Cathy Tyson

Last summer the City of Lafayette welcomed, for the first time ever, two motorcycles to patrol the mean streets of this corner of paradise. The bikes are significantly more environmentally friendly, cheaper to operate and more agile than traditional cruisers. More than six months into their tenure, how's it going?

Allocating resources in an environment of scarcity is a core economics lesson the City Manager and City Council took to heart in the decision to add motorcycles to the police force. Lafayette residents are significantly more likely to die in a traffic collision than an assault or homicide. They figured it just made more sense to use budget resources where the risks are highest, the best way to prevent future deaths and serious injuries is to provide better enforcement. With only 17 sworn staff members for a population of about 24,000, Lafayette ties Danville for the lowest number of officer per capita in Contra Costa County.

"The motor officers wrote 678 citations during the last quarter of 2011. The total number of citations written by the police department rose by 27 percent over the last year," explained Lafayette Police Chief Mike Hubbard. "During that same time period, the number of injury accidents decreased by 20.6 percent."

For drivers who may not see a semi-concealed officer, the Chief points out that, "It's legal for them to sit behind bushes or in driveways. We even have driveway agreements

that many citizens have signed, giving us permission to use their driveway to enforce traffic regulations." The most common ticket is written for speeding or cell phone usage while behind the wheel.

Mayor Carol Federighi reports that fines can vary from \$250 for talking on your cell phone while driving to \$685 for passing a school bus. "We're not doing this for the money," she said. "Lafayette gets on average on about 10 percent of the fines collected. For example a stop sign violator pays a \$350 fine, but Lafayette only receives \$35."

"Police work in a difficult, often adversarial, environment. It's understandable that people don't like receiving citations for speeding or using a cell phone while driving, but that's the law, and the job of the officer is to enforce it," said City Manager Steven Falk. "My experience with our officers is that they are well trained and very professional; if that's not the citizen's experience, then both Chief Hubbard and I want to hear about it."

Obviously no one wants to get a ticket. Quite a number of residents contacted for this story who have received them are unhappy with police tactics, but declined to speak on the record. One older gentleman, who preferred to comment anonymously, believes some of the public trust in the police department has been eroded by officers who hide out.

One recent change that parents will enjoy is new, very short term parking in front of the Lafayette Library and Learning Center. A number of normally law abiding parents had stopped in front of the new library to pick up their kids, and have been ticketed because the curb was painted red - technically no parking to accommodate a County Transit Bus that stops there. A few weeks ago the curb was re-painted white, with very clear instructions - two minute loading zone.

"We understood when we opened the library that we'd need to make adjustments to the building as we learned how it was, in practice, used by the public. This is one of those adjustments," said Falk. "We learned that several parents had received parking citations while sitting in the red zone waiting for their kids, and that felt wrong. We hope this improves the situation."

Reach the reporter at: cathy@lamorindaweekly.com

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