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A VIEW FROM HARBOR STREET

January 27, 2016

Maintaining Exceptional Public Safety

By David Buckingham, City Manager



Public safety is everyone's business. We have three great City departments that provide the primary municipal aspects of public safety, but our residents and visitors have as much to do with public safety as the fire, police and harbor departments. Being good neighbors, living safely, being observant, and reaching out to public safety professionals are all areas where we need great citizen support. Here are a few public safety items going on in Morro Bay.

Body Worn Cameras. The City has completed the deployment of body worn cameras and our police officers are now wearing the digital recording devices regularly. This initiative, an objective set during our 2015 goals process and funded mostly by a grant, is meant to improve safety for officers and residents. Police Department leadership developed a detailed policy for use of the cameras and officers follow specific protocols to help them determine when to operate them.

Public Safety Dispatch and Response. Over a 24-hour period last weekend our public safety team, including the Harbor, Fire and Police Departments, responded to three major incidents – an entrapment, a vehicle fire and a surf rescue. While performance of our well-trained professionals remains exceptional, it is important to note our integration into the county-wide 911 dispatch system has kept response times very fast while significantly improving coordination with regional partners. In a recent incident, more than 10 law enforcement and public safety agencies responded to a critical event in Morro Bay, all based on a single call from a citizen. Our residents are reminded the fastest, surest way to get immediate, professional help in Morro Bay is to dial 911, and stay on the line to let us know two critical things: where you are, and what kind of emergency you are reporting.

Marijuana Cultivation Ordinances. The City believes any changes to our ordinances regarding cultivation and sale of marijuana deserve significant research, public input and discussion. However, a recently passed state law changing aspects of marijuana cultivation required municipalities, if they wanted to retain local control of their policies, to take action this month. Further, it appears certain there will be some voter initiative on the November 2016 state ballot regarding “recreational use” of marijuana that could require modification of local rules.

Considering the need to act quickly to preserve local control on this issue, confident the Council can always “loosen” policies later if desired, and knowing a 2016 “recreational use” ballot measure could generate further local decisions on growing, sale and use of marijuana, the

Council passed the first reading of an ordinance banning commercial cultivation of marijuana. The ordinance carves out cultivation for personal medical use already allowed under state law. Most importantly, the Council is committed, depending on the outcome of a possible 2016 “recreational use” initiative, to having a robust community conversation on all aspects of marijuana cultivation, sale and use in 2017 before potentially enacting a comprehensive set of marijuana ordinances.

Code Enforcement. The City continues to ramp up our code enforcement efforts with a goal to have consistent, proactive, and thoughtful enforcement of all existing city ordinances. Since the City Council made this a specific City objective last year, much has been accomplished and we are on track to have a fully effective program in a few months. First, we budgeted the necessary resources for the program, then we hired two code enforcement officers who have been putting into place a system essential for consistent, fair, and proactive enforcement. Our first focus has been on community education regarding the adopted municipal code sections that traditionally fall in the “code enforcement” realm.

All residents, in their January 1 water bills, received a “top-10 Community Enhancement/Code Enforcement areas” flier providing info on some of the most-violated City ordinances. That information and more is available online at morrobayca.gov/codeenforcement. Our code enforcement team is working with residents across Morro Bay to help them understand our existing ordinances, and how they can ensure their property and activities are within the letter and spirit of the law. This spring, we will begin more stringent enforcement actions with a goal of helping residents comply with our existing codes. Staff will issue warnings, and provide assistance to help residents comply with our ordinances, before considering issuing citations or taking other action. During this process, we want to hear from our residents - what do you think of our existing ordinances? Are there codes you think should be changed? That process is not difficult, our City Council can take action easily and quickly to ensure our ordinances reflect the community we want to be.

Resident input, as we continue to make Morro Bay a great place to live, work and play, remains critical. I always look forward to hearing from you at dbuckingham@morrobayca.gov. Thanks for making this a safe and enjoyable community.

Note: This editorial first appeared in Bay News on January 27, 2016.