

Spagnoli says photos to be stored for a year instead of permanently

By Amy Sylvestri

San Leandro Times

The San Leandro police department spoke to the City Council at a work session Monday night, with a focus on the use of technology in combating crime and a look at the crime rates in the city.

Chief Sandra Spagnoli (who recently received a 5-year contract extension that will raise her salary from \$197,000 in 2013 to \$210,000 at the end of five years) told the council about what's happened in the department over the past year and what they anticipate for the year to come.

One main point of discussion was the police's use of technology in combating crime, specifically a license plate scanning patrol car that cruises around town taking pictures of cars and people – and the photos are stored by the police department.

There was outcry earlier this year when school board member Mike Katz-Lacabe filed a Freedom of Information Act request and discovered he and his family had been photographed over 100 times and those photos were being permanently stored. Presumably, everyone in San Leandro has photos of themselves and their cars on file.

They're called license plate scanners, but the cameras take pictures of the entire car and everything around it, including people.

At Monday night's meeting, Spagnoli announced that the San Leandro police would be switching to use the same data storage program as neighboring cities, which keeps the photos for a year, instead of permanently.

Most of the evening's public speakers came to speak out against the use of cameras to monitor the behavior of people who are not suspected of any wrongdoing.

“Those who give up liberty for security deserve neither,” said public speaker David Erlich, paraphrasing Benjamin Franklin. “Pretty soon we’ll have cameras on every street.” He went on to call the technology “Orwellian.”

Katz-Lacabe said he was happy that the photo storage policy has changed, but didn’t see why photos needed to be stored at all. He said he was also concerned that the change was made by the police department, not by the City Council in a public meeting.

“The police are city employees funded by San Leandro residents and policy changes should be discussed,” said Katz-Lacabe.

Katz-Lacabe’s wife, Margarita Lacabe also said the police have too much autonomy in making decisions.

“I’m very concerned personally and professionally about the transfer of political power to the police,” Lacabe said.

Lacabe pointed out several things that have happened over the past year, including the license plate camera photos, the policy against urban farming, restrictions on permits for entertainment businesses, and the police's position against medical marijuana dispensaries that she believes demonstrates that the police have too much influence over the City Council.

On the other hand, Councilman Tom Dlugosh spoke up in favor of the technology and says he hopes the police department expands its use of cameras.

He'll likely get his wish, as Spagnoli announced that they are testing cameras that would be worn by each officer to record each interaction he or she has with the public, which record both video and audio.

"We need to utilize all the tools possible to make this city safe and I believe cameras are a part of that," Spagnoli said.

Trends in crime were also discussed, particularly the spike in robberies and burglaries.

Burglaries are up 8 percent year-to-date from 2011 (561 January through October), robberies are up 27 percent year-to-date (228 January through October), and aggravated assaults are up 35 percent (128 January through October).

The police report that of the people that the department arrests, 60 percent are not from San Leandro, and of those, 38 percent are from Oakland.

At that point, Councilman Michael Gregory chimed in and asked why San Leandro doesn't have low crime rates like Piedmont. That question wasn't answered.

Spagnoli also told the City Council that she and her staff started off the year with a \$10,000 team-building workshop and discussed employee morale and what their priorities should be.

She said they came up with what she called the "six pillars of character" to guide themselves on the job: "respect, trustworthiness, caring, citizenship, fairness, and responsibility."

“One hundred percent of the members that you have in this department are proud to serve,” Spagnoli said.