

MINUTES
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 28, 2016
SARATOGA CITY COUNCIL SPECIAL MEETING

Mayor Cappello called the meeting to order at 6:09 p.m. in the Arts and Crafts Room in the Joan Pisani Community Center at 19655 Allendale Avenue in Saratoga.

ROLL CALL

PRESENT: Mayor Manny Cappello, Vice Mayor Emily Lo, Council Members Mary-Lynne Bernald, Howard Miller, Rishi Kumar

Traffic Safety Commissioners EJ Tim Harris, Ray Cosyn, Jonathan Choi, Mitch Kane, John Chen, Christopher Coulter, David McIntyre

ABSENT: None

ALSO PRESENT: James Lindsay, City Manager
John Cherbone, Public Works Director
Rick Sung, Captain, County of Santa Clara Sheriff's Office
Crystal Bothelio, City Clerk/Assistant to the City Manager
Mainini Cabute, Management Analyst II

ORAL COMMUNICATIONS ON NON-AGENDIZED ITEMS

None

AGENDA ITEMS

Joint City Council / Traffic Safety Commission Study Session

Mayor Cappello introduced the meeting, noting that the study session was called following the Council's Joint Meeting with the Traffic Safety Commission on March 2, 2016. He shared that the Traffic Safety Commission does an excellent job balancing requests from residents and practical traffic safety solutions. Recently, Saratoga and most cities in California have seen a rise in crime. In particular, Saratoga has seen an increase in property crimes. As a result, the Traffic Safety Commission seemed uniquely qualified for bringing greater awareness to crime prevention in the community on a limited time and scope basis.

City Manager James Lindsay added that Saratoga is still one of the safest cities in California and many of the crimes that have been committed are crimes of opportunity. As a result, the study session offers the opportunity for the City Council, Traffic Safety Commission, and Sheriff's Office to discuss opportunities to make improvements.

Captain Sung expressed support for community involvement in law enforcement efforts.

Mayor Cappello explained that one of the goals of the meeting is to come up with a scope of responsibilities or actions for the Traffic Safety Commission related to public safety.

Council Member Miller shared that he broached the idea of adding this responsibility to the Traffic Safety Commission, because it is such an effective Commission. Recent communications with residents suggests that some people in the community do not understand that reducing crime rates requires residents themselves to be more involved and aware. He suggested a big call to action that residents could rally behind.

Traffic Safety Commissioner Mitch Kane noted that one of the greatest challenges that the Commission faces is public education. The Traffic Safety Commission has found it difficult to engage residents in taking an active role in solutions, even when residents raise issues before the Commission. Additionally, there generally needs to be some problem that motivates people to take action.

Traffic Safety Commission Chair Ray Cosyn requested additional information on the rate of crimes.

Captain Rick Sung explained that crime increased approximately 25% between 2014 and 2015. Similar trends are occurring throughout the state.

Council Member Miller proposed mailing postcards to every home around the holidays with crime prevention and safety tips.

Captain Rick Sung added that the increase in crime is due largely to the passage of Prop 47, and several other recent legislative changes. He added that if an area has a reputation for having alert and watchful residents, criminals are more likely to steer away from those areas.

Traffic Safety Commissioner Jonathan Choi suggested looking at what other Commissions have done to assess what has worked well.

Captain Sung spoke about National Night Out, explaining its purpose and value in building relationships between residents and law enforcement.

Mayor Cappello offered the suggestion that each Commissioner serve as an ambassador that helps different neighborhoods facilitate a National Night Out event.

Vice Mayor Lo said she felt that it is important to send a clear message that Saratoga is not a crime friendly place. In reading posts on Nextdoor, it is clear that many residents don't know about services offered by the Sheriff's Office or when it is appropriate to call 9-1-1.

Traffic Safety Commissioner Tim Harris added that his calls to 9-1-1 when reporting suspicious activity have always been well received. Additionally, Nextdoor.com is a good site for residents to learn about what is happening in their neighborhood and it would be good to encourage people to use that site.

Council Member Kumar noted that there are many factors that contribute to crime that are outside the City's control. However, there are many things residents can do to deter crime, such as getting surveillance cameras or a security system. He noted that people tend to show up for forums or other similar informational meetings only when they are experiencing a problem. He also expressed concerns with National Night Out, noting that it is just one night per year and takes place on a week day, which is a conflict for many residents. He suggested block parties as an alternative.

Traffic Safety Commission Vice Chair John Chen questioned whether people would attend a crime prevention workshop or other similar meeting.

Council Member Kumar noted that the last Q&A session on crime received only 20 participants, which is not a very broad reach.

Traffic Safety Commission Chair Ray Cosyn said he is often reluctant to call 9-1-1 for fear that his call would be a burden or he could receive some sort of penalty for calling in issues that should not be reported to 9-1-1. He proposed that some basic information, such as when to call 9-1-1, could be documented on a flyer and then distributed at the many events that take place in the City.

Council Member Miller noted that the City sent postcards announcing the State of the City to every household in the City, which is an interesting model for communicating with residents. Through this model the City can put crime prevention information into the mailboxes of every household in the City. Information could be communicated through a simple postcard with a call to action to keep Saratoga safe.

Traffic Safety Commissioner Tim Harris suggested a safety seminar.

Council Member Miller noted that the City has had forums in the past and they haven't attracted very many people. Something overt like a postcard or messages on the median banners might reach a broader audience.

Traffic Safety Commissioner David McIntyre raised concerns about the tone of the messaging. He suggested that a brand with a more positive message, like Saratoga is the safest city, would be more effective. A more positive message might prompt people to take action to keep Saratoga safe as opposed to a fear-based or negative message.

Mayor Cappello agreed that the City should avoid messaging that inspires fear or causes residents to feel unsafe.

Council Member Miller added that he link the idea of using branding. He also noted that identity theft is a significant issue in Saratoga and many residents are unaware of the issue or are complacent about it.

Traffic Safety Commissioner Jonathan Choi commented that part of Saratoga's charm is the feeling that you can leave your doors open or unlocked.

Traffic Safety Commissioner Mitch Kane added that it seems like the real goal of an educational effort is to encourage residents to keep their eyes open and call 9-1-1 when they see something suspicious. However, he questioned whether this effort might result in additional calls that overextend resources.

Captain Sung clarified that there are times when calls need to be prioritized, but the Sheriff's Office always makes an effort to be responsive when a resident calls about suspicious activity. On average, residents only come into contact with law enforcement once every seven years. Consequently, the Sheriff's Office strives to make those interactions as positive as possible.

Traffic Safety Commissioner Tim Harris said he felt that the City shouldn't scare people, but it would be good to help make residents aware. He proposed a checklist on how residents can protect themselves.

Traffic Safety Commission Vice Chair John Chen said he liked the idea of a mailer or magnet with a few simple safety tips.

Traffic Safety Commission Chair Ray Cosyn suggested informational materials include the local seven digit emergency phone number for the Sheriff's Office.

Captain Sung spoke about the effectiveness of security systems, surveillance cameras, and family/security dogs in preventing home break-ins.

Traffic Safety Commissioner David McIntyre suggested that in addition to branding, it would be wise to consider consistent messaging that the City and Commissioners can use when communicating with the public.

Council Member Bernald said that she was happy to see National Night Out and involvement of the Saratoga Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) in the staff report. In an East San Jose neighborhood, residents started wearing yellow jackets and walking through the neighborhood at night looking for suspicious activity. A friend in the neighborhood reported that crime rates as decreased as a result. This was reminiscent of one of the ideas in the staff report of calling on dog walkers in the community to keep an eye out for out of place behavior. While National Night Out might be coming up too soon to be introduced to Saratoga this year, there are already some existing neighborhood groups, like homeowners associations and Nextdoor neighborhoods, which can make efforts more manageable.

Captain Sung explained that the Sheriff's Office has started collecting data on Neighborhood Watch groups in Saratoga. Some information is available, but it is not comprehensive. He also commented upon outreach efforts the Sheriff's Office has conducted in partnership with the City, including posts on Nextdoor.

Council Member Miller suggested that some sort of call to action or goal, like transition all residents to locking mailboxes within 5 years, might inspire residents.

Traffic Safety Commissioner Mitch Kane noted that previous calls to actions in Saratoga have not worked out very well as there are some residents who are resistant to change.

Mayor Cappello summarized discussion thus far. He noted that Saratoga is an affluent community that makes residents a target for property crimes. As Captain Sung noted, there are some recent changes to legislation that have influenced crime rates. Additionally, it is clear that criminals generally choose the path of least resistance and a citywide effort to make it less convenient to commit crime in Saratoga will likely reduce crime rates within the city. Furthermore, the best way to do this is for residents to keep an eye on their neighborhoods and report suspicious activity. So, what is the best way to communicate this message to the community? The Council is looking to the Traffic Safety Commission to provide assistance in this area. Perhaps the Commission can meet on off-months to get started on identifying some proposals for the Council to consider, whether that is a forum, mailers, flyers, or something like National Night Out. The Commission could also consider working with other groups, like CERT.

Traffic Safety Commissioner David McIntyre requested clarification on the desired outcomes.

Mayor Cappello added that he would like to see the Commission return with an outlined program of actions or activities that might stretch through the rest of this calendar year.

Traffic Safety Commissioner Tim Harris added he would like to get a better understanding of what other cities have done and where they have succeeded in similar efforts.

Council Member Miller noted that there are many examples from communities with high crime rates and it may be challenging to find best practices from cities with low crime rates, like Saratoga.

Traffic Safety Commission Chair Ray Cosyn asked if the Council has defined its measure of success.

Mayor Cappello said he felt building awareness would be a measure of success.

Captain Sung suggested that call volume might be one way to measure success. Last year, the Sheriff's Office made an aggressive effort to engage residents. As a result call volumes increased 12 percent.

Council Member Miller added that he would like to see a change in crime statistics that show a change in behavior, such as fewer thefts from unlocked vehicles.

Vice Mayor Lo commented that she felt efforts to build awareness could be effective through simple strategies, such as a website of crime prevention tips. By strategically addressing topics of concerns, such as property crime or car break-ins, the City may be able to engage residents more easily.

Council Member Miller noted that the Commission can determine its schedule based on the availability of members. The meetings don't necessarily need to occur on off-months.

Public Works Director John Cherbone suggested that the Commission meet again with the Council in 6 months to update the Council on efforts.

The City Council and Traffic Safety Commission agreed to meet again in September.

Traffic Safety Commission Chair Ray Cosyn said that in the interim the Commission will work on a plan to be delivered in September.

Mayor Cappello adjourned the meeting at 7:43 p.m.

Minutes respectfully submitted:

Crystal Bothelio, City Clerk
City of Saratoga