

# This squad is just the ticket

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Sentinel Staff Writer

**I**MAGINE THE CHAGRIN of a driver who parks his or her car in a handicapped parking zone — only to come back and find someone in a wheelchair giving them a ticket.

Chagrin, indeed. "Actually, they're embarrassed," smiles Francisco Ramirez, 26, one of the five persons — four of them handicapped — responsible for issuing parking tickets in Capitola.

"Most of them just grin and bear it," he adds. "I've even had a few people thank me."

Getting a ticket for parking in a handicapped zone from a paraplegic! How Zen — sort of like telling white lies to an albino. It makes errant drivers pause, as they are used to seeing uniformed police giving them the bad word for overstaying the two-hour time limit.

That's one of the reasons behind the Code Enforcement Unit of Capitola. When a police officer resigned from the force in 1979, chief Robert Allen decided to use the money to recruit handicapped persons to enforce parking laws. (Allen's brother is paraplegic).

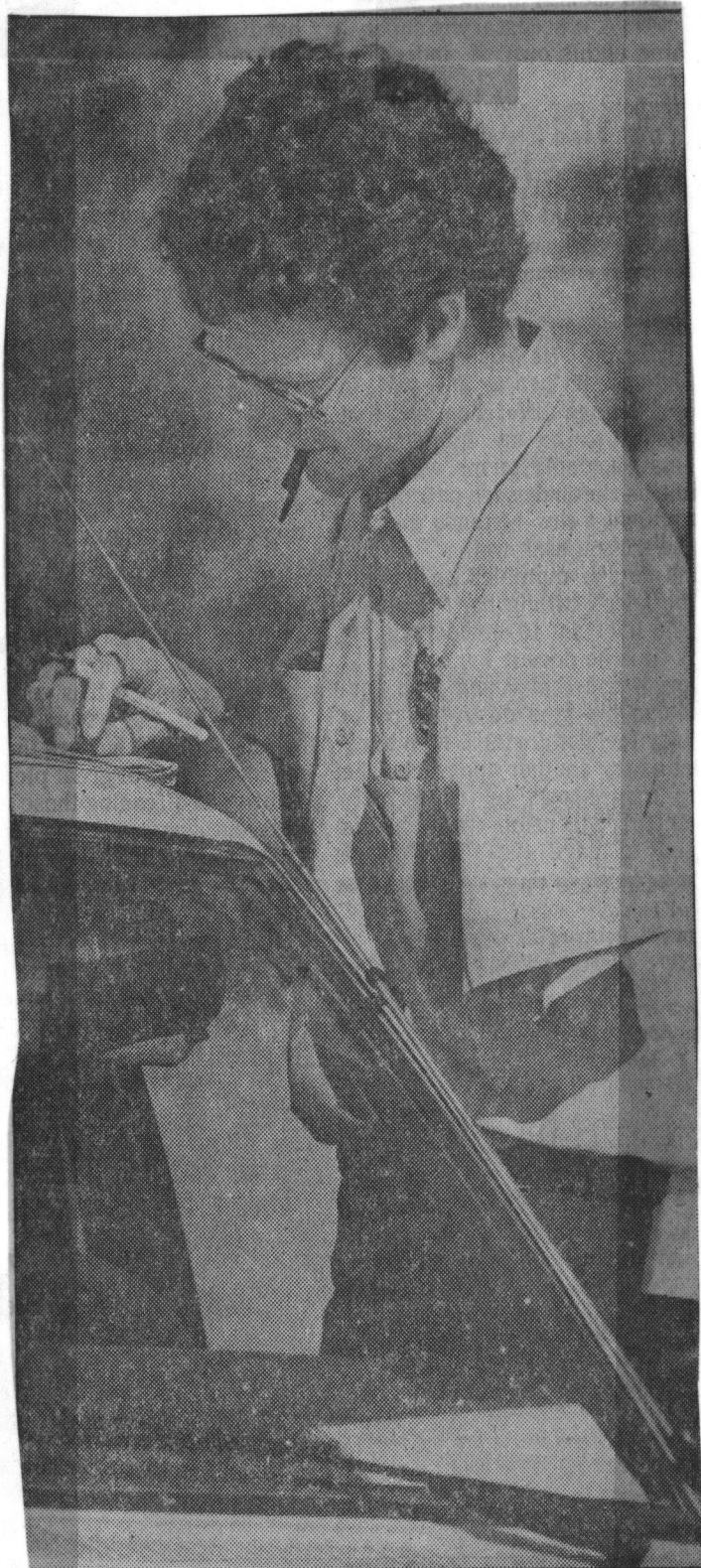
About the same time Capitola City Council put two-hour parking zones into effect along the Esplanade and adjacent streets.

The results have been, in the words of chief supervising officer Tom Hanna, "fabulous."

"We've had good luck with it and the public has been very responsive," Hannah says. "We don't have the kind of image problems other cities have, and I don't get as many citizen's complaints as I do with some of our able-bodied employees."

That's quite a statement for Capitola, where parking — or lack of it — threatens to become the issue equivalent to a 20th century version of the range wars. Parking tickets have increased from a \$3 pinch to a \$7 sting. There is no off-street parking and no municipal parking lots. And each year more and more people move to the county.

Members of the Code Enforcement Unit — Capitola's version of Parking control deputies — include Ramirez, a partial paraplegic; Steven Carr, who lost his left arm in a traffic accident as a boy; Joan Goodridge and Linda MacDougal, who are



Photos by Bill Lovejoy



confined to wheelchairs, and Doris Littlefield, in Hanna's words, "our token able-bodied employee."

"The quality we look for in our officers is communication skills," Hanna says. And being in a wheelchair in no way impairs Coe Unit Enforcement officers from doing a good job.

Understandably, the folks who write parking tickets need all the good press they can get. Carr says he saw one driver actually jack up his car and rotate the tires to erase the telltale white chalk marks.

Another time a traveling drygoods saleswoman tried to bribe him with two bottles of mouthwash.

That's right, mouthwash. "She said she was from out-of-state and she had just gotten a ticket for doing 80 miles an hour on Devil's Slide," said Carr. "Then she said she didn't notice the two-hour parking signs. She asked me if I wanted two bottles of Listerine."

Code enforcement officers write an average of 40 to 60 tickets a day during the busy summer days. In the winter, it slows down to about 10 a day.

Says Ramirez, "The main thing about having a disability is that you have to overcome the stigma of being handicapped. And I think I can say, I have overcome the stigma."

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