

Police shortage felt in Beach Flats

Problem area a high priority for patrol

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The short walk to the grocery store has become a more dangerous jaunt for Beach Flats area residents.

SANTA CRUZ The reason, some say, is that street-corner drug dealers are staking out new territories. So rather than confront the criminals, some residents are simply going out of their way to walk around the prob-

lem areas.

The dealers, selling mostly heroin, are getting a quiet foothold due in part to a shortage of Santa Cruz police patrol officers, according to residents and police. At full staff the beat cops do foot patrols, getting to know locals in the neighborhood and providing a presence, which in turn sends a message that bad guys aren't welcome.

But because the department is down 18 patrol officers from an approximately 60-member patrol force, there simply isn't enough manpower for Beach Flats foot patrols, according to deputy police chief Jeffery Locke. Officers are forced to drive vehicles because they have larger areas to cover.

"It seems the neighborhood has retreated,"

said Beach Flats resident and landowner Phil Baer. "Everybody is back in their houses and you are now even cautious about going to the grocery store."

The nine-acre Beach Flats area is home to more than 1,200 people, making it the most densely populated neighborhood in the city. About 80 percent of the population is Latino, according to census figures.

In 1996 that small land area, positioned next to the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, accounted for 38 percent of the city's felony arrest rate. But the city and residents undertook an effort to make the area safe once again, establishing the beach patrol, cracking down on building code violations and cleaning up the area.

The effort resulted in the area moving from

first in felony arrests to last with only 11.8 percent in 1998, compared to other areas of the city. The city's central core, excluding downtown, was tops, followed by the downtown area.

According to police statistics for July 2000, the beach area ranked second in felony arrests at 22 percent and yet police took the least written reports there among the five patrol areas.

Baer and other residents don't want the criminals to get a toehold again.

Deputy chief Locke insists the department "hasn't forgotten the Beach Flats" and is making the area a high priority for patrol.

Locke said the city can do little but keep trying to hire new recruits because they can't hire private security to make up for the shortage.

"It (the shortage) isn't causing a lot of problems but it inhibits our ability to provide a high level of service, limits officers' time off and requires them to work overtime so there are some adverse effects that way too," Locke said.

The shortage felt in the city is mirrored in most law-enforcement agencies in Santa Cruz County. They all point to a strong economy luring potential candidates to higher-paying jobs in other fields. The high cost of housing in the Santa Cruz area also dissuades potential candidates.

New hires in the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office can make between \$40,000 and \$55,000 a year depending on experience, one of

Please see **COP SHORTAGE** on Page A20

Cop shortage: Beach Flats a high priority

Continued from Page A17

the lowest wages among county law enforcement agencies.

The Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office has 17 openings among about 60 patrol deputy positions, Scotts Valley has five openings among 16 patrol posts and Watsonville has five openings among 40 patrol positions.

Capitola's force is the only one at full strength with all 12 patrol positions filled, not including the two extra officers the department hired on in preparation of having future openings.

Locke said that when he first applied for an officer position there were 350 applicants. In the most recent round of openings, only five people applied.

Some of the current vacancies may soon be filled by Police Academy recruits or on-the-job trainees.

When Sheriff's Office spokesman Kim Allyn applied to become a deputy about 20 years ago, he was one of 150 candidates for two positions. Most candidate pools now number between five and six, he said.

It takes almost a year to become an officer. The approval process includes intensive academy training, thorough background checks and psychological evaluations.

Sheriff's Office Chief Deputy Charles Weaver considers hiring issues a "crisis" for law enforcement. He said nationwide that only one in 10 applicants are approved for hire after the testing, and some fail for having used

drugs, having criminal records or failing a polygraph test. The same scenario is true for the Sheriff's Office, he said.

Scotts Valley police Chief Steve Walpole said he has three new patrol officers in training but has been down five positions for at least six months. With his city so much closer to San Jose than any other Santa Cruz County city, officers are more easily lured away by better pay.

"It's a real challenge," he said.

In Watsonville, Capt. Manny Solano said the shortage doesn't prevent his department from requiring officers do periodic foot patrols. He credits fairly good pay and good department morale as reasons people stay.

With a higher crime rate and a gang culture that has spanned generations, it's also a challenge working in Watsonville, he said.

"It's definitely a fast-paced department and there's not a lot of lull time but I think the community is also very supportive and officers feel appreciated," Solano said.

Solano said if he had seven to 10 officers off it would require some department adjustments.

"It's difficult to do community policing when you are dealing with issues like the other agencies are dealing with," he said.

Capitola police Capt. Joe Granata, a 26-year veteran, said his department received City Council permission to hire two more officers than they would normally need. The idea, known as

overfilling, has worked, he said.

It allows the department to remain at full manpower levels when one or two officers leave or are promoted.

"I think our chief has been smart and the City Council generous to have the foresight to allow us to do this," said Granata. He said it's the first time since the mid-1980s employment has been so steady.

In the last few months, the Capitola police department has hired four officers from rural Northern California communities, where salaries are much less than here. Those replaced included two who went to the Sheriff's Office and several retirements, he said.

The Sheriff's Office has severe shortage problems in other areas as well, including 17 correctional officer openings, and attributes much of the vacancies to low wages and benefits.

The Sheriff's Office recently set up a special full-time recruitment unit headed by Sgt. Craig Wilson.

Sheriff's spokesman Allyn said deputies work hard but working so much and having so little time for a personal life makes it hard for everyone.

"I think the work performance does suffer somewhat because of burnout," he said. "It's a super demanding job and then if you have a wife and kids it's much harder. I think we do a real good job for this community and if not we'd hear about it."

While local agencies said their officer shortages aren't stopping them from fighting crime or solving cases,