

Scotts Valley police happy in new digs

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SCOTTS VALLEY — It was hard to keep a secret at the old police station. Crooks were tipped off about their impending arrests by their buddies who themselves were being questioned and could eavesdrop on an officer in the cramped old barn that served as headquarters.

It was impossible to keep anything private, says Chief Steve Walpole. "It was like a scene from Hill Street Blues. Someone was being questioned here, somebody being booked over there and roll call going on at the same time."

But unlike the popular TV show, the old tin barn near Sky Park Airport in no way represented big-time police work. It was strictly podunk.

Times have changed.

Scotts Valley is growing and so is its police department.

The 15 sworn officers and staff of eight have moved into new quarters at Scotts Valley's first real City Hall, which sits at the crest of Civic Center Drive.

Signs on the rooms down the shiny hallway read "Juvenile," "Records," "Crime Lab" and "Armory." There's an entire separate patrol bureau and a new, \$100,000 communications center.

All of those functions used to take place, sometimes simultaneously, in Walpole's old office.

Everything in the new building is hooked up to computers.

There's even an "intoxilizer" room where drunken-driving suspects can prove their guilt or innocence by blowing into a tube of an electronic analyzer. Since blood-alcohol levels decrease with time, Walpole expects quicker sampling of suspects to result in a higher conviction rate.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Police dispatchers Pat Harding and Kathleen Roberts work in Scotts Valley's new station.

Previously, the breathalyzer test was administered at County Jail, often as much as an hour or more after the arrest.

On the bright side, Walpole says, someone who isn't drunk now will be spared a trip to jail.

The professional set-up of the new police headquarters already has lifted department morale, says Walpole. He says he expects the new facility to be a boon both to recruiting new officers and retaining experienced officers.

"We even see a difference in the public who come here," Walpole said.

Before, Walpole was right on top of his officers. Now, he says, he has to make an

effort to go around to see his troops.

"I don't mind. I'd much rather have it this way," he says.

As important as all the new space is the ability to expand for the future.

"I expect us to be the fastest-growing police department in the county in the next few years," says Walpole.

The 16-year department veteran already has seen plenty of growth in Scotts Valley.

"When I started we answered less than 300 calls a year. We'll handle more than 8,000 this year."

But even though those calls resulted in an 18-percent increase last year in serious crimes — murder, robbery, rape and bur-

glary — Walpole can still boast that Scotts Valley has the lowest crime rate in the county.

"I don't consider the increase in calls alarming, except that the trend is going up with the growth of the city," Walpole says.

Most of the increase in calls, he says, relates to burglar alarms, shoplifting, juvenile problems and auto accidents.

Traffic is the biggest problem facing the city and its police department.

Statistics show 24,000 cars a day travel Scotts Valley Drive. The count for Mount Hermon Road is 34,000 cars per day.

"About 90,000 people pass through the city every day, and that's not counting

those on Highway 17," Walpole says.

Gridlock, he says, is rapidly approaching.

Scotts Valley patrol officers wrote 4,800 citations in 1987, a 17 percent increase over the year before. "That's a result of an inadequate road system," he explains.

The statistic that most disturbs Walpole is the number of accidents. Officers responded to about 500 crashes, he says.

The location of the new police headquarters, Walpole says, should help officers get to their calls more quickly, since the station sits right at the boundary line of the north and south "beats."