

Capitola experiment draws attention

By BOB SMITH

In the news business, there are two kinds of news — good and bad. The "bad" variety seems easy to come by. And many media critics and just plain readers complain that too often the papers, the TV and the radio are filled to overflowing with the negative kind of news.

Not that reporters and editors want it that way, but so often they find themselves scrambling as fast as they can just to keep up with all of the news.

Good news, it seems to some, is a commodity that is rare indeed. But this is the saga of one bit of good news and how it grew and grew and grew.

The Capitola police department, in the past, hasn't been known for its ability to generate good news. Besides the usual kinds of "bad news" stories dealing with human misery and loss, it's gotten a few more headlines detailing troubles with its bosses on the city council as well as troubles with federal agencies like the U.S. Attorney's office and the Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Division.

But that all changed this summer with the story of the handicapped team of code enforcement officers that patrol the village in their wheelchairs looking for parking violators.

The story of the "quad squad" started out as a story in the Green Sheet last month about six men with various physical handicaps who had been hired for the summer by Police Chief Bob Allen to enforce parking and other city ordinances in the village.

But then it started to grow with San Francisco Chronicle reporter Rick Carroll picking it up the following week for his paper and the Associated Press wire.

But let Allen tell what happened then:

"The Green Sheet ran the story on a Wednesday. The Chronicle called on Thursday, came over on Friday and said they wanted to run the story Monday," Allen said last week.

"They ran it on Monday, referring to us (Capitola) as Capistrano Beach in the first edition. "On Tuesday, we started getting phone calls from Channels 7, 8, 11, KSCO, KKAP.

"Most of the interviews were over the phone but the intensity began to build," recounted Allen. "I got a call from NBC (radio) in Washington at home at 7 a.m. Wednesday morning and I did a tape.

"When I arrived at the office Wednesday (a week after the Green Sheet article was published), the Sentinel was here, a little chagrined, I guess that the wires and television were running a story out of Capitola a week after the Green Sheet and they still hadn't picked it up.

"I didn't know it at the time, but I found out later the Channel 5 (KPIX in San Francisco) had been at the county Board of Supervisors meeting Tuesday afternoon with a camera crew because of what was supposed to go down between (Supervisors Chris) Matthews and Mrs. Liddicoat.

"Concurrently, there was an item on the agenda that afternoon on the formation of a handicapped commission and Terry Brickley (a handicapped rights advocate) had packed the chambers with a lot of handicapped people, who were all talking about the Capitola story.

"The (KPIX) photographer got a kind of skewed impression of the importance of our program, but it excited him so that

he quickly shot his footage at the Board of Supervisors and hauled over to Capitola that evening.

"They ran the story on the 11 o'clock news (Tuesday) and beat out every other San Francisco area television station.

"Wednesday morning, every station in the Bay was on my back. Convoys of cameramen ran around Capitola and all that our people did that day was be interviewed."

From there, the interest waned locally, although Channel 2 out of Oakland is still planning a feature segment on the program. But the word spread across the nation and even across the international borders. CKO — All Canada news radio — did a piece on the program. Several midwestern radio talk shows called the department, doing an on-the-air interview with Allen and other police officers. ABC news in Detroit also picked it up.

Then came the syndicates — the Washington Post — L.A. Times; the slick magazines — a stringer for Reader's Digest; the pulp magazines and tabloids — Globe and Signal, among others; and now the "house organs" like Goodwill Industries' national newsletter.

Allen is a self-confessed publicity hound. "There is no one with a hungrier ego than mine, but even mine is beginning to fill.

"The whole thing has gotten to the point that it is almost embarrassing."

In the beginning, Allen was reluctant to be interviewed about the program, fearing a negative reaction to the program by people who would not understand his motives for trying it.

That hasn't happened, but Allen doesn't believe the community and the public yet realize the minimal risk taken. "There was no relation between what we have done, the risks we took as management and the accolades we received."

But the only one yet to pan the program, Allen says, is an old adversary, San Jose Mercury columnist Harry Farrell.

"I was afraid that the idea would be lost in a description of a do-gooder program to help the handicapped. That's happened, but it hasn't been as negative as I feared.

"It wasn't to be a program to benefit the handicapped," Allen says, referring to his initial proposal, "but I had great expectations that they would benefit us.

"And I thought it was neat that I could hire the handicapped. I've a personal reason — association with a member of my own family. But there was a more substantial reason — I wanted people who could be readily hired for a short range program without creating a liability (unemployment insurance) for the city."

So far, Allen hasn't been disappointed in the program, and apparently neither have the residents and merchants in the village.

"The program is working very, very good," says Allen.

Merchants agree, and for the first summer in many years, a shopper can

Allen doesn't have the statistics yet, but he believes July may set a new record in the numbers of citations issued for parking and city ordinance violations.

And there's a bonus that no one counted on — the number of complaints and verbal altercations between police and unhappy motorists is way below normal.

"The opportunity for verbal conflict is much greater in code enforcement than in any other phase of police work," Allen said.

"You probably get more hassles from writing a traffic ticket than from catching a bank robber. The national

WATSONVILLE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN Aug. 10, 1979

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Bob Johnson of the 'Quad Squad' cites a van in downtown Capitola.

pasttime is to criticize police for traffic enforcement.

"And the traditional police officer, faced with that, tends to become more reserved, which is viewed as officiousness, coldness and condescension.

"But people who are confined to wheelchairs, and it may be true for any form of handicapped, polish their verbal skills and tend to work better with people. This group (the code enforcement officers) are no exception. They are better than average in drive into the village with some assurance of finding a parking spot on the weekend.

interacting with people.

"And even though the enforcement has increased, the public complaints have decreased," Allen says, although conceding that maybe the fact that its a guy in a wheelchair giving you a ticket may make some difference.

That may change as the village parkers get used to the guys working the code enforcement detail.

"But at least in the first month, there has been a marked decline in complaints," Allen concludes.

Is the program successful enough to be repeated next summer?

"Yes," says Allen simply and emphatically.

"The program is successful in terms of making parking available. You can now find a parking spot available and there are fewer people willing to take a chance in parking down there all day."

If nothing changes between now and the second week in September when the program's money runs out, Allen says he'll be back before the city council this winter, asking for a mid-year appropriation that will allow him to restart it next June.