

Retiring chief took over a department under fire

Department now needs change

By BOB SMITH
STAFF WRITER

When Bob Allen took over as chief of the Capitola Police Department 7½ years ago, the department had been torn by internal dissension and was under fire from the community and other law enforcement agencies.

Today, it's a far different department, with its place in the community re-established.

As Allen prepares for retirement, he believes the new chief, 42-year-old Donald E. Branton, will face problems too, but not the crises that shook the department in 1977.

Jerry Clarke, one of two incumbent council members who participated in hiring Allen, remembers the controversy surrounding the Police Department.

The federal Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agency had been investigating charges that the department allowed individual officers to illegally purchase personal firearms by using city purchase orders, thereby getting cut-rate prices from gun manufacturers. The City Council several months before Allen's arrival had launched its own investigation into the department's management and had placed the police chief and his two top assistants on administrative leave. The police chief subsequently retired and Sheriff Al Noren had been operating the department on an interim basis.

"Fortunately," Clark recalled last week, "we had the good luck of hiring a chief who was a good administrator and who had a sense of humor.

"When we hired him, that department was in such turmoil that we needed someone to pull it together. He did."

"I haven't met our new chief

yet, but I hope he'll carry on like Bob did," Clarke said.

Allen, 51, plans to retire for the second time, sailing his 41-foot sailboat this fall to Cabo San Lucas at the tip of Baja Mexico and spending the winter in the Sea of Cortez.

Allen retired with a medical disability from the San Jose Police Department shortly before being hired to take over the Capitola department.

Now he feels it's time for him to leave Capitola.

Under the state's retirement program for police officers, Allen was eligible for retirement again when he reached age 50.

"But as a practical matter, for an organization to stay dynamic and healthy, changes need to occur," Allen said last week in a lengthy interview.

"In a rapidly growing department, the changes are brought about by growth. But the reality is that the city limits here are fixed, the population static and the department is not changing."

The changes to be wrought in the Capitola Police Department, Allen feels, will come from within, with changes in leadership.

"There is a time when it is appropriate to move on. Even if I didn't want to sail, it would be time to move on. It's bad to wait until you do so poorly that you have to move. Right now, I'm not feeling any pressure from the community or the department to leave."

Allen looks at the job he undertook in restoring the department's community image as perhaps his greatest accomplishment during his tenure as police chief.

"I think I did a lot to improve the department's image with the community. The community today feels better about the Police Department and, to a lesser extent, I was able to bridge the gap between the community and the department."

Part of the bridge was in making the department highly responsive to the community's and the City Council's demands.

"The police are asked to do everything for which there isn't another arm of government formed to handle.

"It's the community's ace-in-the-hole. They call us about everything from potholes to UFOs," Allen said.

"The true function of the police is to buffer society from the unpleasant. But if the department is isolated, then that function does not occur."

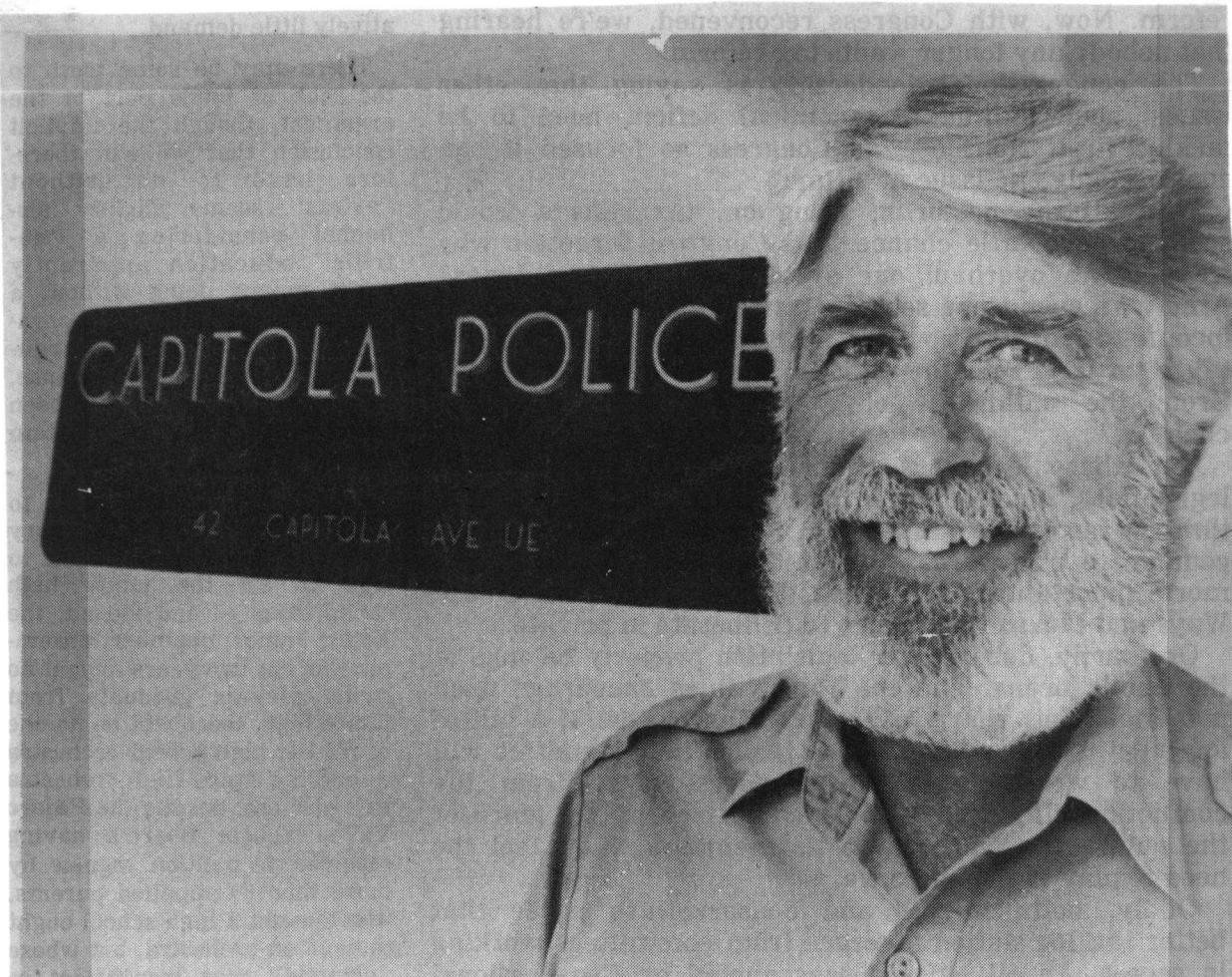
His job as police chief has been "to sense through the city manager and the City Council what the public wants so far as safety and public order is concerned, and tune the department to those needs.

"We're tough on loose dogs, guard against (illegal) signs, slow speeders down, and crack down on drunken drivers. We respond to calls faster than most police chiefs can even envision.

"Some people believe that we make a federal case out of everything, but I believe the department responds to what the community is concerned about."

Allen said his philosophy has been to recognize and deal with problems before they reach the point where the community rises up in arms and demands action.

"Some people are critical of our high visibility in that they



Bob Smith

Retiring chief Bob Allen to go sailing

think we're a police state and interfere too much," he said.

But he argues that it's better to deal immediately with, say, a single street musician setting up his guitar case on the Esplanade sea wall and playing for donations than to wait until there are 30 to be dealt with. The sea-wall musician would be violating state or local ordinances if he were either begging or operating a business without a license.

"Others are offended because we take away their operator's licenses, destroy their cocaine, or keep them from robbing or burglarizing someone here. When I hear that kind of com-

plaint, it's music to my ears."

Allen gained national publicity when he instituted the "quad squad" — handicapped men and women who became the city's first code enforcement officers. But today, he discounts the importance of that move. "I was a manager who needed to hire part-time employees."

The physically handicapped, many of whom were considered unemployable by others, proved that they could do the job.

"I would do it again in a minute," Allen said.

"I'm leaving a department staffed with really seasoned and competent people, a depart-

ment pretty tuned to the community.

"But I'm also leaving a problem for the same reasons that I chose to go.

"The department will be hard to manage because the traditional means of challenge and reward are not available here."

Those are promotions and new job assignments.

"Everyone here now has worked in about every job possible. The last major promotions were made in 1979.

"The new chief will have to find ways of keeping people interested," Allen said.

"I have absolutely no idea of how to do it," he concedes.