

Sheriff, DA join forces in new gang task force

Santa Cruz, Watsonville
say they're too taxed
to add their own officers

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LIVE OAK — Gang members will be under the gun this summer, when the District Attorney's Office and Sheriff's Office team up to create a county gang task force focused on dismantling gang leadership.

D.A. Bob Lee and Sheriff Phil Wowak announced their new partnership Monday. The task force officially starts work in July.

Sitting in the task force's new office at an undisclosed Mid-County location Monday, Wowak and Lee talked about how the strategic use of specialized investigators could impact a range of crime — from intimidation to wanton violence — by locking up gang leaders.

"Those types of crimes don't just happen because somebody has nothing else to do," Wowak said. "It has a lot to do with the infrastructure and the key role players."

"We're going to outline who we think the major players of the gangs are," Lee said. "We want to arrest them and send them to prison."

Lee added that the task force will do "proactive stings instead of reactive prosecutions."

However, the police departments from the county's two largest cities will not be a part of the task force when it launches this summer, largely because leaders there say they already have committed officers to other gang-breaking efforts.

Wowak said he hopes, in time, other police leaders will see the value in a unified front and join the task force. In the meantime,

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the task force will be another resource for those departments, according to Lee.

"We hoping to help other agencies as much as possible," the district attorney said.

The task force is the latest in a series of recent efforts by local law enforcement to target gang crime in the county, but Lee and Wowak said establishing a gang team has been a long-term goal for both agencies.

The task force grows from the county's 4-year-old Joint Area Gang operations, but will be a full-time, permanent program. The "JAG ops," as police call them, are infrequent gang sweeps aimed at curbing gang crime, typically after a violent incident.

"You're dealing with a lot of information, and that's what makes a task force a lot different than JAG ops," Lee said. "You're taking surgical strikes. You're going after the people who intimidate, harass and commit violence."

Lee said he already has assigned the two top gang investigators in his office to the team. This month, Wowak will select two deputies to work full time on the task force. Another four will work with the group part time, the sheriff said.

The task force will join several programs that target gang crime in the county.

■ Santa Cruz police announced partnerships earlier this month with two federal agencies. Police will work with the Drug Enforcement Administration to go after drug-dealing gang members, specifically in the Harvey West neighborhood and Pogonip, a city-owned open space between UC Santa Cruz and Highway 9, and also with the national gang unit from the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency to identify and prosecute gang members.

■ Watsonville police two weeks ago wrapped up a year-long investigation into a violent Sureno street gang. Gang investigators worked with the FBI and several local police agencies during Operation Groundhog, a probe that led to 44 arrests.

■ The county's Anti-Crime Team investigates drug sales and gang crime on a regional level. Past cases have involved the arrests of gang members suspected of dealing drugs, stealing cars and trafficking weapons.

But there are still gaps in gang investigations, especially in long-term informa-

tion-gathering and fighting gang recruitment, according to Lee and Wowak.

The task force is not grant-funded. It involves reassigning existing personnel, though one new investigator will be hired by the D.A.'s Office. Most other costs — office space, vehicles and computer equipment — will be covered by using existing county property, such as old patrol cars, Wowak said.

County Supervisor John Leopold, whose district covers Mid-County, said the effort appears promising, especially when coupled with prevention efforts like youth programs: "I think the creation of the task force is a great idea. An ounce of prevention goes a long way."

However, so far the county-wide gang task force only includes two law enforcement agencies. The police chiefs in Watsonville and Santa Cruz said they have stretched their staffs thin to work in other already established partnerships but plan to collaborate with the task force on some cases.

"We're happy that the county and the D.A.'s Office decided to commit people to gangs like Santa Cruz and Watsonville have," said Santa Cruz Police Chief Howard Skerry, who noted his department now has 10 officers dedicated to gang investigations. "Once they're up and running, we hope the communication flows."

Watsonville Police Chief Manny Solano was supportive of the new gang task force and said a dedicated unit can do data-driven investigations rather than responsive enforcement.

"It's a guarantee we'll work with them," he said.

But Solano said his department needs to focus its attention south of Aptos, where gang shootings have become a common occurrence. Also, he already assigns officers to work with the county's Anti-Crime Team.

"I have to be a little careful not to overdedicate my resources," Solano said. "We do have a current ongoing task force right now that's working not only on drugs, but on gangs."

The Santa Cruz department also doesn't have the manpower to assign officers to the task force, according to Deputy Police Chief Rick Martinez. His department had to restructure its schedule to provide the officers necessary to staff the new partnerships with federal agencies on gang violence and drug sales: "We're all working toward the same end goal, but we have to honor these commitments we've already made."