

Police Department Ride-Alongs

Report of the 2000-2001 San Francisco Civil Grand Jury

SUMMARY

Individual members of the Civil Grand Jury (CGJ) accompanied San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) patrol officers in a series of "ride-alongs" in most of the districts in the City and the SFPD Marine Unit. We also inspected the Special Operations Unit Headquarters at Hunters Point and the Police Academy.

Despite the wide variety of situations the officers were required to resolve in the course of their duties, we observed that they demonstrated a high level of professionalism. Responding to incidents as varied as the report of a lost dog, a call to administer aid to an inebriated homeless man, a "shoot-out" with an armed assailant, and preemptive crowd control measures following the 2 a.m. closure of nightclubs, the civilians involved were treated with respect and compassion. We also observed that the patrol officers were well informed as to problematic areas and individuals, and were proactive in terms of crime prevention within such locations.

In a majority of the tours the officers were called upon to interact with both homeless individuals as well as groups residing in loose encampments. We noted that in each instance the officers took deliberate steps to ensure these citizens were treated with respect and dignity.

The CGJ makes no recommendations relative to the regular precinct ride-alongs. Regarding the Marine Unit, the CGJ recommends that:

The Assessor's Office and SFPD come to an agreement as to the best method to pursue contacting boat owners to ensure that boats are registered and the appropriate tax paid.

SFPD management negotiate the situation with PacBell Park management with respect to using voluntary overtime funds for marine coverage at McCovey Cove.

The SFPD evaluate the Marine Unit in light of recent and planned port development to ensure that adequate staffing is provided.

BACKGROUND

The general intent of the ride-alongs was to permit CGJ members to view the districts in which they lived from the perspective of the police officer, and gain familiarity with the day-to-day responsibilities of a police officer and the various situations they encounter.

Members of the CGJ participated in patrol ride-alongs with officers from most of the district stations. The ride-alongs lasted from two to four hours and were conducted between the hours of 9 p.m. and 2 a.m. After a brief meeting with the Watch Commander of the district station, we were paired with patrol officers and accompanied them in their patrol car as they worked.

Since San Francisco has a diverse population, the SFPD patrol officers who police this varied terrain must cope with an interesting array of issues. We noted that, while the officers of the SFPD were often called upon to respond to situations associated with a large metropolitan area, they clearly implemented their role of "peace officer", diffusing potentially volatile incidents with both kindness and consideration.

Several years ago, the SFPD initiated the concept of community policing, recognizing that each San Francisco neighborhood or district had individual needs and concerns. With many SFPD district boundaries covering neighborhoods having differing needs, the ability of patrol officers to effectively interact with each segment of the community is among the most vital of skills for a patrol officer in this City. During our ride-alongs, we noted their skills in action. Clearly, the officers we accompanied considered it to be an important part of their job.

Members of the CGJ also inspected the Police Academy and the Hunters Point headquarters of the Special Operations Unit. The Special Operations Unit provides specialized police services such as the canine patrol, mounted horse patrol, marine and air support, and special weapons and tactics (SWAT). Both facilities appeared to adequately address the needs of the respective Units.

The SFPD Marine Unit is currently staffed with three police officers who patrol the approximately 64 square miles of county waters within San Francisco Bay. The Unit shift covers approximately ten hours per day, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., with the goal of assuring full coverage (two persons) on Saturdays and most Sundays. The Unit is responsible for enforcement of state and local laws as they relate to the use of waterways, search and rescue, evidence recovery, and boating safety and education, including arrests. The Coast Guard only enforces federal regulations.

The CGJ asked if members of the Unit stopped boats and verified boat registration. Unit personnel indicated that both the Coast Guard and the Marine Unit do this. Unit personnel noted that not all boats were registered as required, and that as a result San Francisco was not receiving all tax money due it. We subsequently discussed boat registration with Assessor's Office personnel, who confirmed that fact.

Once per year, harbormasters send a roster to the Assessor's Office that lists all slip tenants. The roster includes the name of the tenant, who usually is the boat owner, and typically includes the vessel registration number. The Assessor's Office then checks the roster. Any new boat is sent a blank vessel property statement to fill out and return. Part of the statement includes the purchase date and price, which the Assessor's Office uses to assess an unsecured personal property tax. Some boat owners have refused to fill out the vessel property statement, and the Assessor's Office has no method by which to compel the owner to do so. There are no firm statistics on how many boats are not paying the required tax. Several years ago, the Marine Unit did a one-time check to persuade boat owners to register and pay the required tax. The check reportedly produced good results; however, no documentation was available to indicate the increase of the number of boat owners registered or the amount of additional tax generated.

We inquired of the Marine Unit whether or not funds from the voluntary overtime program (also known as the 10-B program) were used to provide patrol coverage in McCovey Cove. The 10-B program is used to provide for a number of patrol officers within PacBell Park. However, PacBell Park management has not requested Marine Unit assistance for patrol of McCovey Cove as part of this program. Members of the CGJ expressed concern that inadequate police coverage of McCovey Cove could possibly lead to future problems.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Finding: San Francisco is not receiving tax money due it from unregistered boats.

Recommendation:

The CGJ recommends that the Assessor's Office and SFPD reach an agreement on the best method to ensure that boats are registered and the appropriate tax paid. We further recommend that the Board of Supervisors request documentation of the solution adopted.

Required Response

Board of Supervisors - 90 Days

Assessor - 60 Days

San Francisco Police Department - 60 Days

2. Finding: A large number of boats have been known to congregate in McCovey Cove during events at PacBell Park. Not all boats observe safe boating laws at these times, which is cause for concern due to the number of boats in the area.

Recommendation:

The CGJ recommends that SFPD management study the need for a police presence in McCovey Cove during these activities, possibly using 10-B program funds to assure appropriate coverage.

Required Response

San Francisco Police Department - 60 Days

3. Finding: There is a recent increase in development along the San Francisco waterfront, with more being planned.

Recommendation:

The CGJ recommends that SFPD evaluate the Marine Unit in light of recent and planned port development to ensure that adequate staffing is provided.

Required Response

Mayor - 60 Days

San Francisco Police Department - 60 Days
