

Friday, February 25th, 2011 | Posted by [Mike Roberts](#)

Sheriff asks residents to be the community's eyes and ears

It's like he never stopped campaigning.

With a loud voice and a clear message, recently elected Sheriff John D'Agostini, who outlasted a field of seven strong candidates in a grueling 2010 campaign filled with both accusations and promises to reform a department with acknowledged "culture" problems, reaffirmed his priorities with his west county constituency at the Feb. 23 El Dorado Hills Chamber of Commerce "Community Connections" breakfast.

The breakfast event was hosted by the Four Seasons Civic League at their lodge off White Rock Road. El Dorado County Superintendent of Schools Vicki Barber played emcee, gathering, consolidating and occasionally sanitizing questions submitted by the roughly 80 mostly grey heads in attendance.

Barber introduced the sheriff and summarized his background, adding, "We've had a lot of interaction lately," a reference to the recent shooting at Schnell School in Placerville, which became the subject of some interesting hindsight from both the sheriff and the superintendent.

D'Agostini credited the Placerville Police, who arrived within three minutes of the first call. Sheriff's deputies were a couple minutes behind. D'Agostini arrived four minutes behind his first deputy. He had a total of 40 department members on site within 30 minutes, he said. Incident command was quickly established.

"They had it dialed," he said. "My job was to be a calming influence" during the period immediately following the shooting, "a very dynamic situation."

The school was immediately placed on lockdown; the teachers were instructed not to open their doors for anyone except law enforcement or a school administrator. "But in this case the janitor, who had keys to all the rooms, was a familiar face," explained D'Agostini.



STRAIGHT FROM THE SHERIFF — John D'Agostini, seen with emcee Vicki Barber, answers questions at last week's community breakfast. D'Agostini encouraged attendees to communicate with their Sheriff's Department. Village Life photo by Mike Roberts



DESPITE THE SERIOUS tone at the community breakfast El Dorado County Sheriff John D'Agostini and El Dorado Hills resident Monika Billingsley share a laugh. Village Life photo by Mike Roberts

“That put a whole different twist on it. It wasn’t a normal clearing. The suspect could have been hiding in any closet or anywhere on campus.”

A teacher might have unknowingly let him into a classroom, he said.

The classes were released from lockdown after the janitor was apprehended. The students were eventually shuttled by bus, under the sheriff’s control, to the fairgrounds, where they were released to anxious parents.

Following a formal review of the incident, post-lockdown protocols have been modified. “We made it more difficult than it needed to be,” said D’Agostini. “From now on, when we release the scene, we’ll give responsibility of the children back to the district, who can better decide how to reunite them with their parents.”

Barber added that the danger was exacerbated by the concern that the janitor had access to keys at other schools, all of which were also locked down, in cooperation with law enforcement.

D’Agostini spent the balance of his time at the podium fielding questions and addressing his priorities as sheriff, starting with gangs, drugs and youth.

Gangs

Both the Sureno and Norteno Mexican street gangs now have a foothold in El Dorado County, said D’Agostini. “The gang problem is real. They’re here for our kids.”

In a followup conversation, D’Agostini confirmed that both gangs recruit white, black and Asian youth, in addition to the core Hispanic members. “That’s how they build their organization.”

Deputies are mandated to identify and validate gang members. Those validated who then commit a crime and are successfully prosecuted receives stiffer sentences.

Kids are an important source of information on gang activity, the sheriff added, saying, “That’s why it’s so important that we build and maintain good relationships with the youth in this county.”

D’Agostini said he encourages deputies to engage more with kids they encounter. “When a deputy can drive by a group of kids and they wave back ... with all five fingers ... that’s a good thing,” he joked.

Marijuana

“The public voted for Proposition 215 in the spirit of the little old man suffering in his wheelchair needing relief from his pain,” said D’Agostini. “It was never about the 18-year-old growing 20 plants in his yard and selling it to the 15-year-old down the street.”

He made it clear he has no problem with truly medical marijuana. “But there are so many people making huge profits on this stuff. These dispensaries aren’t tax-paying businesses in your community. Every dispensary we ever built a case on was understating its profits.”

Medical marijuana abuse has a role in the larger pharmaceutical drug abuse problem, he continued. “We send the message that marijuana is medicine and it’s OK to use. So are those painkillers in the medicine cabinet.”

Despite a downturn in big pot busts in county forests last summer, D’Agostini warned that

Mexican drug cartels have made inroads into rural Northern California. “The Mexican drug wars are tapering off because the cartels realize what the turf war is costing them down there,” he said. “So they are looking at cultivation up here.”

The paramilitary drug cartel Los Zetas, already a violent presence in Southern California, has established itself in Northern California, the sheriff added. “They’d love nothing more than to bring their drug war onto our turf.”

Budget cuts

“Budget-wise, we’re going to be OK,” he predicted.

The sheriff credited his predecessor, former Sheriff Jeff Neves, with prudent fiscal planning. “You’ll hear that the Sheriff’s Department hasn’t taken cuts, but that’s wrong,” he said. “This department took cuts at the beginning of the game. They felt the pain long before I got here.”

He detailed cuts that total \$1.2 million to \$1.8 million, mostly achieved through attrition and unfilled vacancies that have turned a 404 employee department into 347 member lean machine over the last two years – a little too lean, in fact. D’Agostini announced that he’s hiring a couple deputies.

Culture change

D’Agostini admitted that the department is “still dealing with the culture issues,” that predate his arrival, including a federal lawsuit and disciplinary issues he couldn’t discuss.

He restated his campaign promise to change the culture in the department through a “total policing strategy,” which he defined as a philosophy of total care for witnesses, victims and the community; total enforcement of crime on criminals and total professionalism.

“You work as if your grandmother is looking over your shoulder, as if you wouldn’t mind reading about it in the Mountain Democrat above the fold tomorrow.

“It’s not a written policy,” he said. “But you know when you’re doing it.”

D’Agostini admitted that very little “departmental cleansing” has been necessary thus far. “I sat down with my administrators in the first couple weeks and made my expectations clear,” he said. “So far everyone is performing. My opponent is still there, and he’s doing a good job.

“The bottom line is that this is civil service. If you are doing your job, and doing it at my direction, then that’s great. At this point we’re working together as a family to solve our problems.”

Undersheriff selection

Shortly after taking office D’Agostini created controversy by appointing his brother-in-law, Yolo County Sheriff’s Capt. Rich Williams as his undersheriff.

Realizing that it was a controversial appointment, he researched county nepotism law, “and didn’t violate it,” he said. “He is truly the best man for the job. I’ll put his qualifications and experience up against anyone in the El Dorado County Sheriff’s Office.”

He hired Williams in part because “Our mesh is perfect,” he said. “His career path over the last 26 years has been much more administrative than mine. The fact that he’s my brother-in-law is a huge

plus for me because I can trust him 100 percent.”

Williams is also an important part of his succession plan. “Rich has no interest in being sheriff,” said D’Agostini, “and he’s promised me eight years (before retirement).”

D’Agostini committed to selecting an internal candidate as successor by the time Williams retires and grooming the candidate during his own final term or two as sheriff.

“Not to shove anyone down your throat when I finally leave, but someone should have been identified and groomed a long time ago for this job,” he said. “There was no obvious choice. That’s why we had so many candidates, and why we ended up with a new sheriff from outside the county.”

Crime

D’Agostini confirmed a rash of burglaries in El Dorado Hills and Cameron Park, including one at the home of podium-mate Vicki Barber, with “no evidence and no leads.”

Village Life’s El Dorado Hills Crime Watch on VillageLife.com lists no less than a dozen burglaries/thefts in a recent three-week period. Cameron Park’s Crime watch lists 10 in the same time frame.

The sheriff asked for help. “If you see a vehicle that doesn’t belong in your area, write down a license number and make sure it’s correct,” he said. “That’s critical. Don’t worry about the color and make. Just get me that license number.”

Det. Kevin Pebley, a 10 year resident of El Dorado Hills, joined his boss at the podium and told the residents “You are our eyes and ears. We all know our neighborhoods. Get that information to us. I’ll give you my cell phone. Call me any time you see something going on.”

Softened CCP requirements

Concealed carry permit requirements have been streamlined and softened, he said. Applicants no longer require three letters attesting to their moral character, and no longer must demonstrate “good cause.”

“The applicants for these permits aren’t the criminals,” he said. “They are the ones trying to protect themselves.”

The changes have resulted in a slight uptick in applications. “I expected hundreds,” he said. “I continue to believe that an armed society is a polite society.”

Other promised changes the new sheriff has underway include:

- Onsite, rather than online crime reporting. “We no longer force anyone to report their crimes online. If you want a deputy, you get a deputy.”
- Extended walk-in hours, 8-5 weekdays.
- Expanded roles for STAR volunteers and reserves.
- Pharmaceutical drug takeback program

D’Agostini closed with a plea for the public to engage with his department. “Our deputies are here in the community. If you have an issue, talk to them. If you’d like to talk to the sheriff directly, call me directly.”

He said me might not pick up every call, but promised to return all messages, and left his cell phone number as good faith.

mroberts@villagelife.com

Short URL: <http://w3.villagelife.com/?p=4756>