

New commander takes over at CHP

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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KELSEYVILLE — Increasing road safety and partnering with the community to save lives are just two of the goals that Lake County's new California Highway Patrol commander has in mind as he begins his tenure.

Lt. Mark Loveless, 46, is taking the helm as commander of the CHP's Clear Lake area office in Kelseyville. He succeeds Lt. Dane Hayward, who retired this past summer.

Loveless, whose most recent assignment was in Redding, is no stranger to Lake County. He served as an officer in the Clear Lake office for two and a half years in the late 1990s.

He and his wife, Lori, have been married 25 years, and have two children — Megan, 23, and Drew, 20.

Loveless started "late" as a CHP officer; Loveless was 29 years old and had a career in forestry when he decided to join the CHP. His interest was piqued by a friend who was a CHP officer. It's that kind of word of mouth, Loveless added, that is the CHP's best recruitment method.

Loveless started his CHP career out of the academy in East Los Angeles, where he spent five years before transferring to Lake County in 1996 and then on to Redding's Northern Division CHP office.

While in Redding, and still a member of the CHP, he took an assignment for three years with the Department of Justice's Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement.

From there it was back to the Redding area office, then on to Susanville, and back to CHP's administrative division in Redding, where he was an administrative sergeant. After serving there for two years, the Lake County assignment became available.

Loveless is part of a younger generation of CHP administrators who are challenged to do more with less, because the budget isn't as strong as it was five years ago. He said that requires some creativity, including working closely with local allied agencies to make the best use of resources.

The CHP's ranks — with 8,000 officers statewide — also has grown very little historically, said Loveless, in comparison to the vast growth of the state population. Locally, the CHP office has 25 officer positions, with three of those slots not filled or about to be empty due to retirement.

But when it comes to Lake County itself, home to the largest lieutenant-run division in the CHP's vast Northern Division — reaching from Lake County north to the Oregon border — Loveless said the county has challenges regarding public safety that aren't different from anywhere else.

One of those challenges is finding good recruits. New cadets are seldom brought from the academy directly to Lake County, said Loveless. In an effort to change that his approach to recruitment is to draw interested applicants from the community, because area residents know the needs and will come back here to work and live.

A goal for Loveless is promoting increased education and safety for motorcycle riders. He said there is a growing trend of more people riding motorcycles, which he believes is due in part to higher gas prices.

With the growing number of riders comes an increase in motorcycle-related collisions. That may be partially an issue of inexperience, as many of the collisions have been the fault of the motorcyclists, said Loveless.

To address that, Loveless said he's pursuing a grant that will support a combination of education and enforcement efforts in an effort to drop the collision rate.

He's also working on getting a full-time auto theft investigator for his office. From 2006 to 2007, vehicle thefts in Lake County increased 4.8 percent while the county's CHP office had a 13.1-percent increase in the number of stolen vehicles it recovered. The most popular cars to steal, he said, remain Honda Accords and Toyota Camrys.

One of the most important things for people to understand about the CHP is that the agency needs the community to be involved in the work of making the roads safer. That includes wearing seatbelts and properly using child safety seats, and sharing a common goal of saving lives.

"Most of us get into this to help people," Loveless said of CHP officers.

He said the drop in the death rate on the highways can be attributed to many factors — including the CHP getting the word out on safety measures and the resulting community involvement.

With his new job, comes a whole new level of responsibility. "There's no passing the buck from here," Loveless said.

A lot of his work from now on will have a more formal, administrative flavor. A CHP commander's desk is liable to have huge stacks of paperwork, and then there's the business of managing officers and staff.

However, Loveless said his heart "is still on the road," and he'll be out there on the highway whenever he gets the opportunity.

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