

Kollar juggles complexities as sheriff in divided county

By Kathryn Reed

Fred Kollar was a short timer from the first day he took the helm of the El Dorado County Sheriff's Department. And he's OK with that.

But he's not about to take on the roll of a lame duck leader just because he was appointed the position earlier this year when Jeff Neves left before his term was up or because he will retire after a new sheriff is elected in November.



Fred Kollar

For some time there has been talk about morale being lousy inside the department. Kollar disagrees. He doesn't get that sense walking down the hallways in Placerville, where he spends the bulk of his time. Nor does he overhear negativity when he is changing in the locker room.

"I don't want my successor to clean up my problems," Kollar said during a recent lunch. Meaning he is doing what he can to ensure there is cohesiveness in the department.

He points to the number of people applying for the sergeant's test as evidence people are happy.

"People wouldn't strive to move higher up if morale were bad," Kollar said.

A vacant detective-sergeant's position had more than a dozen internal applicants.

Still, it's curious that the two candidates for sheriff represent an insider (Craig Therkildsen) and an outsider (John D'Agostini). Perhaps that is more reflective of the electorate than what is going inside the department when it comes to status quo v. change.

One issue that is wearing on the department is a recent discrimination suit filed by an employee.

Tahoe-Placerville relations

An issue that has been going as long as Kollar can remember is the disconnect between Lake Tahoe and Placerville. It's even obvious in the sheriff's race. The six candidates in the June primary barely showed their faces in Lake Tahoe. The two finalists have set no public events in the basin, nor does anyone seem to realize there is a sheriff's race in November.

The department has most newbies start in Tahoe, then go to Placerville. The idea is then they have a feel for the whole county as well as an appreciation for what goes on in the basin. Kollar said any affection an officer had for Tahoe seems to wane after a couple years.

Part of the issue is that a fraction of the 175,000 county residents live in the basin. Estimates are about 30,000 are on this side of the summit.

Kollar isn't in Tahoe nearly as much as he would like. One of the things that is different with him compared to his predecessors is they all had an undersheriff. When he moved from the No. 2 to No. 1 post, his former job was not filled.

But he also points to this Tahoe-Placerville divide not being unique to the sheriff's department. Most departments with a Tahoe office tend to feel isolated by the granite barrier

known as Echo Summit.

That summit is of concern to Kollar and officers working in Tahoe because it's expected to be closed next spring or come with substantial delays when Caltrans replaces the rock barrier.

County employees commute between the two areas. Sheriff's deputies regularly transport inmates over the summit.

"It's going to add an hour each way," Kollar said of routing his staff through Amador and Alpine counties.

Plus, cell phone and radio reception can be sketchy on the back roads.

Tahoe specific issues

For a small county, and the portion of Lake Tahoe being a blip on the map in some ways, this area has had it's share of high profile events.

Right now Joseph Nissensohn is sitting in the South Lake Tahoe jail awaiting his murder trial for a crime that occurred in 1989. The trial in this death penalty case is supposed to start in January, but with the death of a key witness, it could change things.

Kollar has testified at hearings involving that case. The trial will be in South Lake Tahoe.

From the 2007 Angora Fire, it's media relations that the sheriff said needed the most improvement.

"We didn't have a good handle on it until the fourth day into it," Kollar said.

On the first night – June 24 – the department was planning how residents of the 254 houses that burned to the ground and their neighbors would be allowed in. Kollar kept the road

closed so people could assess the damage without being hounded by onlookers.

Deputies on looting patrol took down the addresses of the houses that were destroyed. This provided displaced residents with quick, accurate information.

“It would have been a great day on patrol if they were not my neighbors,” sheriff’s Lt. Randy Peshon said. His house survived. The stories of his heroic acts to get people out of the inferno are cherished by those he helped. Some say he is lucky to be alive.

Kollar was also the lead spokesperson last summer during the first press conference after Jaycee Lee Dugard was rescued after 18 years of captivity.

“We worked that case long after people thought we had stopped,” Peshon said.

Shortly after Dugard was rescued, Kollar was sent to the Antioch compound where she and her two daughter lived with the kidnapping suspects, one of whom fathered her children.

These cases just scratch the surface of what Kollar has been involved in during his law enforcement career.

Publisher’s note: *Read Lake Tahoe News on July 27 for look inside the South Lake Tahoe jail.*