

South Tahoe police chief looks to overhaul department

By Kathryn Reed

Honeymoons are supposed to last longer than eight days for department heads. No so for South Lake Tahoe's police chief.

Brian Uhler has been tasked with handling a reorganization of the department because Lt. Marty Hale has announced he is retiring Dec. 30.

"We're considering a restructure. It could possibly mean more boots on the ground at the line level," Uhler told *Lake Tahoe News*. "I'm not prepared to say we need more or less officers."



Brian Uhler

Hale said his retirement has nothing to do with not being given the chief's job. When he got the notice the city manager was going outside the department he looked at the two-year service credit as incentive for early retirement and filled out the paperwork.

Hale, who is in his 50s, has been with the department a little more than 24 years. He worked for 2½ years for the Utah County Sheriff's Department near Provo after graduating from Brigham Young University.

"It's been a great place to work and a good community," Hale said of South Tahoe.

He won't be leaving for good right away. He will work on a part-time basis through June, but at retired stats. This gives Uhler, who has been on the job less than a month, time to figure out how to structure the department, as well as allows Hale to be on the job when Lt. David Stevenson attends the FBI Academy in April.

But Hale doesn't know what he will do when summer comes along.

"I can pick and choose what my next career will be," Hale said. He isn't committed to staying a resident of the Carson Valley either.

Learning the ropes

Uhler has been busy meeting with groups in the department and scheduling one-on-one sessions with sworn and non-sworn personnel. He's asking what they want.

Officers are saying they want more training. The current City Council has wiped most training off the books for financial reasons without much analysis to know what the training might have been for.

El Dorado County Superior Court Judge Suzanne Kingsbury has told Uhler he needs officers who are trained to be expert witnesses in gang cases in order for suspects to be put behind bars.

Uhler is contemplating an officer exchange with a department well versed in this regard.

He was able to get in on the last part of a meeting Thursday with the South Lake El Dorado Narcotics Enforcement Team members.

The police associations will meet Dec. 6, with the reorg on the agenda.

On Dec. 8 a department-wide meeting is scheduled to discuss

ideas everyone has for what the future of the department looks like.

“I hope we come to some consensus with what to do in the future, or at least a clear understanding of where we are going,” Uhler said.

Staffing issues

With Hale’s departure, it leaves one lieutenant and one captain right under Uhler. That would be an unusual hierarchy if it were left that way.

“I don’t like administrative duties to fall on the sergeants,” Uhler said. “They oversee the officers in the field. If we take the sergeants out of the field, we undermine ourselves.”

Capt. Martin Hewlett, who was interim chief after Terry Daniels left nearly a year ago, never wanted to be top cop. But he has said retirement isn’t that far off. That prospect allows Uhler to envision longer term at what the department may look like.

Uhler is quick to say he has made no decisions about what changes are forthcoming. He knows officers are interested in working four 10-hour shifts, some want to work 12-hour stints.

In the department’s 45-year history there have been a dozen reorganizations. There are those who remember when the department was more flush with personnel. Today three sworn and one non-sworn positions are frozen.

On the community survey City Manager Tony O’Rourke is developing will be questions about what the residents want from the police department. Uhler believes too many programs are in place because the resources to carry them out don’t exist. He wants citizens to help prioritize what the department should be doing besides the expected patrol.

As Uhler examines how the department operates he is also

analyzing patrolling patterns that create a dead zone in the middle of town while the bulk of activity is near the state line and Y.

Then there is the issue of the workload tripling on a Friday from 8pm to 2am, but not triple the staff to handle it.

It might be possible to utilize reserves more often to handle things like traffic, where guns and handcuffs aren't warranted.

Other concerns

Uhler's signature is already on the bid documents to acquire five patrol cars. He said the fleet of 28 vehicles is in sorry shape. He called it "eye-opening" to find out the percentage that need replacing – 17 of those 28.

Instead of continuing to buy vehicles outright, he wants to investigate a lease option.

To deal with the sketchy technology, Uhler met Wednesday with Lt. Les Lovell of the El Dorado County Sheriff's Department to talk about sharing a system. He is meeting with Sheriff-elect John D'Agostini today.

The radio system the police use was implemented in 1985. Now it is costing the city more than \$100,000 a year to keep putting Band-Aids on it, is how Uhler describes it. He said how reports are done via the antiquated computer system means officers are in the station and off the street for longer periods than seem reasonable.

Combining resources with the county would mean each could tap into the system to know if the other had had an encounter with a suspect. It's also possible SLTPD could handle the sheriff's dispatch instead of it being routed through Placerville.

While Uhler sorts through what needs to be done at the station, he still hasn't unpacked his house and is living

among boxes .