

Citizens' group raises concerns with police

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By KAREN GLEASON

A perceived lack of neighborhood patrols and “collaboration” with the U.S. Border Patrol were among issues discussed at a meeting earlier this week between a local grassroots citizens’ group and members of the Del Rio Police Department.

DRPD Chief James Von Debrow III, members of his command and administrative support staff met with leaders of The Border Organization (TBO) on Monday. TBO leaders expressed concerns they say have been voiced when meeting with community members.

TBO leader Adrian Castro said the group’s purpose is to develop community leaders and initiate strategies to deal with issues important to the community.

“We teach democracy and how the democratic system works,” Castro said. “We’re not associated with any political parties, and we don’t support any parties or candidates.”

TBO leader Sandra Fuentes said among issues that TBO addresses in Del Rio are infrastructure, health care, living wage, education and housing.

“The reason we’re here today, Chief Debrow, is to have a discussion with you about what has come out of our house meetings,” Fuentes said. She described house meetings as small gatherings in citizens’ homes where TBO members and citizens will talk about matters important to those individuals.

Another TBO leader, Irma Cardenas, said, “My house is located in the San Felipe area, and we are seeing a lack of police patrols in this neighborhood. By that, sir, I mean vehicles are passing through our streets at excessive speeds and also not stopping at the designated stop signs.”

Cardenas said these reckless drivers are posing a danger to neighborhood children, who often play in the street, and to residents who walk in the area.

“Our concern is that we have seen the police patrol the main arteries of Del Rio, such as Dr. Fermin Calderon Boulevard and Veterans Boulevard, Bedell Avenue and Highway 90,” Cardenas said. “Given the fact that there is a shortage of police officers, we would like

assurances that our neighborhoods will be given as much attention as (other areas) throughout the city.”

Debrow said, “Let me start by saying our staff level is down, but our enforcement is much higher than it’s ever been, and so our police officers – the ones that we have left – are talented, dedicated and their performance level is very, very high. So they are working in the neighborhoods, and if they are not working in the neighborhoods, I would like to know.”

The chief said “traffic enforcement and working in the neighborhoods is very, very important to me.” Chief Debrow also said his priorities in that area have been made clear to DRPD Capt. Apolonio Hernandez, who heads the department’s enforcement division.

“(The officers are) there, and they’re doing the job,” Debrow said.

He said much of the enforcement activity is concentrated on the city’s main traffic arteries out of concern regarding a high number of auto accidents on those streets.

Fuentes told Debrow that at the end of one house meeting, she and other TBO members observed a police patrol car stopping a vehicle on U.S. 90 on the city’s east side. She asked whether Texas Department of Public Safety troopers or Val Verde County Sheriff’s Office deputies could not deal with traffic enforcement issues on U.S. 90.

“Any time, if you have concerns about your streets and roadways, call Capt. Hernandez and we will work those things out,” Debrow replied. “The Texas DPS, from which I retired after 27 years, has a role, but their role is not inside the city.

“The city of Del Rio belongs to the members of my department, and I’m not here to take a backseat to any other agency,” he said. “We’re doing our job quite well and quite effectively.”

Debrow and DRPD Capt. Mike McClellan stressed that for police to address problems in any area of the city, awareness of the issues must first be raised.

“The one thing that we do need, and that we’ve always needed from the citizens, is for you guys to talk to us because while you may not see a patrol unit on your street, he may be a few blocks away on (another) street, working on a detail there,” McClellan said.

“We would love to be able to say that we will have an officer on every street, but realistically, that would be a lot of officers that we would have to have, but if we have good collaboration between groups and individuals who tell us, ‘Hey, there’s an issue here,’ then we can direct resources to that area.”

Irma Moncivais, another TBO leader, spoke about concerns she has about DRPD patrol officers “collaborating” with U.S. Border Patrol agents.

“We’ve heard several instances of people bringing this issue up, and I think this could have a big impact on citizens coming forward and talking to the police department,” Cardenas said.

“They told me this story about a lady that had gotten stopped (by the police), and the Border Patrol was called in,” Cardenas continued. “This lady was illegally here in the United States, and she was then deported to Mexico.

“We all believe and feel that our police department shouldn’t be doing the job of the Border Patrol agents, and in order for our citizens to have the courage to come out and tell the police department that we’ve been victimized or we saw somebody get victimized, they have to have that confidence that they will not be asked about their immigration status,” she added.

Moncivais asked Debrow if the police department could commit “to just doing its job” and not “calling the Border Patrol to find out about a person’s immigration status.”

Debrow replied, “I agree with everything you just said. That is not our primary role, so if our officers are collaborating with the Border Patrol and working immigration, that’s the first I’ve heard of it. And I guarantee you, if I would have heard that, I would have stopped that immediately. That is not what we are here to do.

“Our role has nothing to do with immigration. That is not our job.”

TBO asked Debrow for support around its after-school programs, and the chief committed to working with the group on this matter.

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