

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT PLAN

GOAL 1.3 LISTENING SESSIONS



Summary: August 6, 2020 Listening Session with the Sonoma County Lowrider Council

On Thursday, August 6, 2020, Santa Rosa Mayor Tom Schwedhelm, Santa Rosa Chief of Police Rainer Navarro, Community Engagement Division Director Magali Telles, Community Engagement Coordinator Danielle Garduño, and Community Outreach Specialist Gustavo Mendoza met with eight members of the Sonoma County Lowrider Council for a listening session and dialogue.

History of the Sonoma County Lowrider Council

In 2015, several members from various lowrider car clubs throughout Sonoma County came together to discuss opportunities to work together and unify their missions of giving back to their communities. Together, these car club members formed the Sonoma County Lowrider Council, modeled after other councils that operate in other parts of California (i.e. San Francisco, Stockton). The Lowrider Council is made up of members from the following car clubs: 1 Firme Car Club, Good Times, Gran Familia, Latin Rollers, Ranflitas, and Viejitos. There are also some members of the Lowrider Council who are not affiliated with any car club.

There are currently over 400 families involved in the Sonoma County Lowrider Council, plus extended family members that come to car shows and community events. The Lowrider Council has hosted community events and created several programs over the last five years including:

- Scholarship program for formerly incarcerated youth attending school at the Santa Rosa Junior College;
- Backpack drives for youth;
- Cinco de Mayo event at Finley Community Park;
- Trunk or Treat at KBBF Radio Station
- Support Your Local Paletero (food vendor); and
- Coordinate with other car council in the state to support one another.

Lowriding Demystified and Explained

The Lowrider Council took time during the listening session to talk about lowrider culture and to demystify some of the stereotypes people place on lowriders and the act of lowriding. To start, members talked about the reputation lowriding has had – historically, lowriders have had a bad reputation, often linked with gang and other criminal activity. However, they have noticed that this reputation has begun to change and is becoming more positive in many communities. “Lowriding is a family thing.” The Lowrider Council agreed that lowriding is a family-oriented activity, with many wives, children and other family members getting involved in events and coming out to “cruise” with the car club members. Lowriding is something that is becoming a worldwide phenomenon, with car clubs being established in other countries such as Japan, Australia and Mexico.

Lowriding is also seen as a form of healing for many of the Lowrider Council. Members have experienced various forms of trauma throughout their lives and have found that working on their “rides” (cars), being part of a car club, and even the simple act of “cruising” is a form of healing from that trauma. In addition, the culture of lowriding is beginning to change and is also being recognized as a violence prevention strategy. One of the group members mentioned that many of the elder lowrider members are taking time to mentor the younger generation by teaching them how to work on cars.

Women are also equally important in lowriding. Several of the members of the Lowrider Council are women and have been featured in local media with their cars. Some of the women in the Lowrider

Council also hold officer positions with the Council and within their own car clubs. “It’s something that we take pride in and it’s something that I love to do. It’s important to me to be a role model for our kids” and for other youth in the community.

Discussion Points

Community Engagement staff worked with members of the Lowrider Council to establish an agenda for the listening session and members of the Lowrider Council submitted several questions for the Chief of Police to consider prior to the session. Several discussion points came up during this listening session, including community engagement opportunities with the Santa Rosa Police Department (SRPD) and the cruising ordinance.

Discussion Point One: Community Engagement Opportunities with SRPD

The Lowrider Council members circled back to the reputation of lowriders and lowriding as an activity, and how both have not always been seen positively within the community. They mentioned an understanding and connectedness with the current reputation of the SRPD and how they are currently not seen in a positive light by some community members. In addition, while there was tension in the past between lowriders and SRPD officers, interactions lately have been positive. The Lowrider Council went on further to stress the importance of engaging with the community as a way of relationship building and healing. “I don’t want my kids to grow up in fear of calling the police.” They offered several opportunities to work together to engage with the community, while also giving back to the community:

- Have the Chief and other SRPD officers participate in the Lowrider Council events
 - Members invited the Chief to participate in the upcoming Support Your Local Paletero event on August 22, 2020 at 5:00 p.m.
 - They also invited the SRPD to participate in other events, such as Cinco de Mayo and the backpack giveaways.
 - Members asked if they could hold Trunk or Treat in Courthouse Square and have SRPD participate in the event
 - There was also the idea to have a Register to Vote Cruise and have the Mayor and other Council Members participate.
 - The Lowrider Council will be starting a program called the Barrio Award which recognizes someone in the community for the work they do that helps others. They mentioned having the Chief or Mayor assist in presenting those awards as they come up at events.

- Regular meetings with the Chief and Mayor – set up monthly or quarterly meetings to check-in with the Lowrider Council on community issues. The Mayor also suggested that the Lowrider Council meet regularly with SRPD’s Field Training Officers.

A larger project was proposed by the Lowrider Council to the Chief – the creation of a SRPD Lowrider Patrol Car. There are several other jurisdictions in California that have a similar car (i.e. Stockton*, Los Angeles), which is not an active patrol car, but rather a vehicle used for community engagement and outreach purposes. The Lowrider Council asked if the Chief would be willing to provide them with a retired patrol car such as an older Crown Victoria (Vic) and they would do all of the work on the car to make it a lowrider. They would assign different members to work on the various parts: new tire and rim installation, hydraulic installation, paint and exterior design, and interior design. The car would then be returned to the SRPD to store and use in community events, such as the Rose Parade, different car club events and cruises, Cinco de Mayo, etc. “Kids would run towards the police car instead of away from it!”

The Chief was agreeable to this project and stated he would assign members from the SRPD Community Engagement Team to participate. They will work with the City’s Community Engagement Office to create

a plan and timeline for the project. The Mayor was also enthusiastic about the project and even asked if they'd be willing to do a lowrider for the Fire Department.

**Video of Stockton Police Department Lowrider Patrol Car:*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDf0ZpdouEU&t=1s>

Discussion Point Two: Cruising Ordinance

The second point of discussion centered around the City's cruising ordinance. The ordinance was created around 1988 and was primarily to address public safety and access to emergencies by public safety vehicles. The Chief stated that they have not enforced the ordinance in the last 20 years and would only use it to alleviate traffic for emergency vehicles. The ordinance is also helpful as it allows officers to divert traffic during an emergency. However, they currently do not cite drivers for "cruising," but they will still issue citations for vehicle code violations. Their main concern is not the cruising currently, but the sideshows that are happening, which are very dangerous and put lives at risk. Members of the Lowrider Council stated that they are frustrated with the sideshows, not only because of their danger, but because the media has a tendency to lump lowriding in with sideshows. "We are all about low and slow," and members said they wouldn't drive their lowrider in a fast manner for fear of damaging the car they worked so hard on. The members asked if there was a way to amend the ordinance to focus more on the sideshows rather than cruising and also asked if the No Cruising signs on Mendocino Avenue could be taken down. The Chief said he will take a look at the ordinance and have conversations with appropriate staff about amending the ordinance and also the removal of the signs.

Other Topics Discussed:

- Most vulnerable population is our undocumented citizens
- First interaction with an officer should be positive. For example, one group member mentioned that he was pulled over and immediately asked by the officer, "Probation or parole?" Instead of asking that question, ask to see the person's identification or even just say hi.
- The Mayor asked the group how the City can help to make them feel safer in the community. The group was asked to take this question with them and send thoughts to staff.

Outcomes and Next Steps

- Staff will assist the Lowrider Council in getting a follow-up meeting set-up with the Chief and Mayor.
- Staff will develop a timeline and plan for the lowrider patrol car project.
- The Chief will figure out if he can attend the event on 8/22 and will also see if SRPD can send an officer to the event as well.