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15 Minutes With . . . Chief Of Police Jim McDonnell



A long-time resident of Long Beach, Jim McDonnell was named chief of police by City Manager Pat West nearly a year ago. (Police department photograph)

Since the start of his service in Long Beach nearly a year ago, Chief of Police Jim McDonnell has emphasized the application of various state-of-the-art technologies to better communicate with the public, reduce crime and improve efficiencies. As budgets for local governments across the nation face serious revenue shortfalls, layoffs within public safety are becoming a regular occurrence. McDonnell said his department has been fortunate up to this point, but the challenges are growing so he must determine how to do the best job possible with dwindling resources.

McDonnell became the city's 25th police chief after spending 29 years on the Los Angeles Police Department force, holding every rank in the department and ultimately reaching the second-in-command position as assistant chief of police. While working in L.A., McDonnell earned the department's highest honor for bravery – the Medal of Valor.

McDonnell earned a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from St. Anslem College in Manchester, New Hampshire, and a master's degree in public administration from USC. He has trained criminal justice professionals and is considered an expert on policing issues, and he has lectured on these topics around the world. McDonnell is also a former lecturer on public policy at UCLA. He is currently the president of the California Peace Officers' Association and is a member of the International Association of

Chiefs of Police, California Police Chiefs' Association, Peace Officers' Associations of Los Angeles County, the California Commission on Peace Officers' Standards & Training and others.

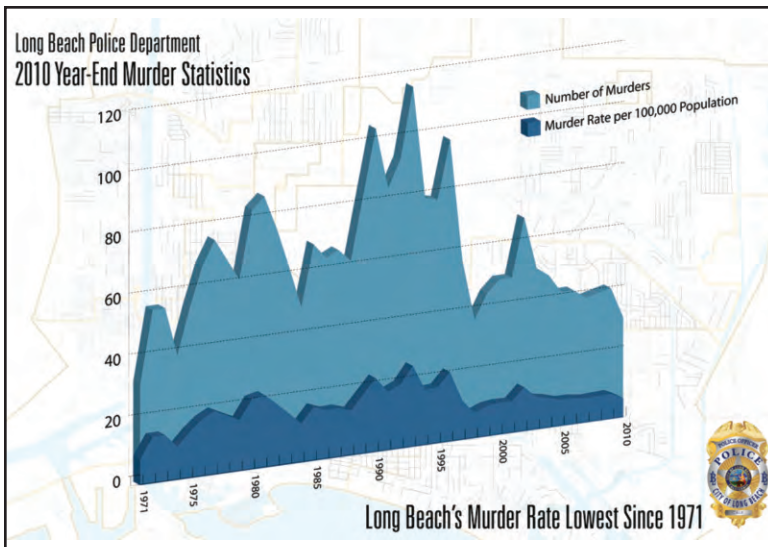
Chief McDonnell sat down with Staff Writer Tiffany Rider to discuss his first year on the job and ideas on how to alleviate some budgetary concerns with advanced technology.

LBBJ: March 13 marks your one-year anniversary with the department. Are you happy you took the job?

McDonnell: Absolutely. It's been a great year. It's probably been the fastest year of my life with so much happening. In spite of the economic challenges that we have, I think we've had a great year as an organization.

LBBJ: What do you consider your major accomplishments during your first year?

McDonnell: Certainly the things that you can measure are the easiest to point out, which would be the crime stats. Homicides have been the lowest they've been since 1971. Our clearance rate for homicides is 90 percent, which is unheard of. . . . I take my hat off to our homicide detectives for that. By having fewer murders, [our detectives] have had more time to work on cold cases which, using good old fashioned police work coupled with forensic technology such as DNA analysis, we've been able to solve cases from years past and we will continue to do that.



LBBJ: Looking back, is there something you would like to have done differently?

McDonnell: No. When I look back on it, I had some vacation time before I started the job here from L.A. Rather than taking vacation, which most people would say would be the smart thing to do, I used that time . . . getting acquainted with people within the department and also out in the community. I tried to learn as much as I could in a short period of time about the culture of the organization, the challenges the organization is facing and then what the communities' perspectives were on the police department. In that month, I gained a lot of insight from a variety of perspectives and I think it helped me prepare for the year ahead.

So looking back, a lot has happened, some significant challenges. But I think using the strengths of the team that we have in place here, we've been able to get through those challenges very well.

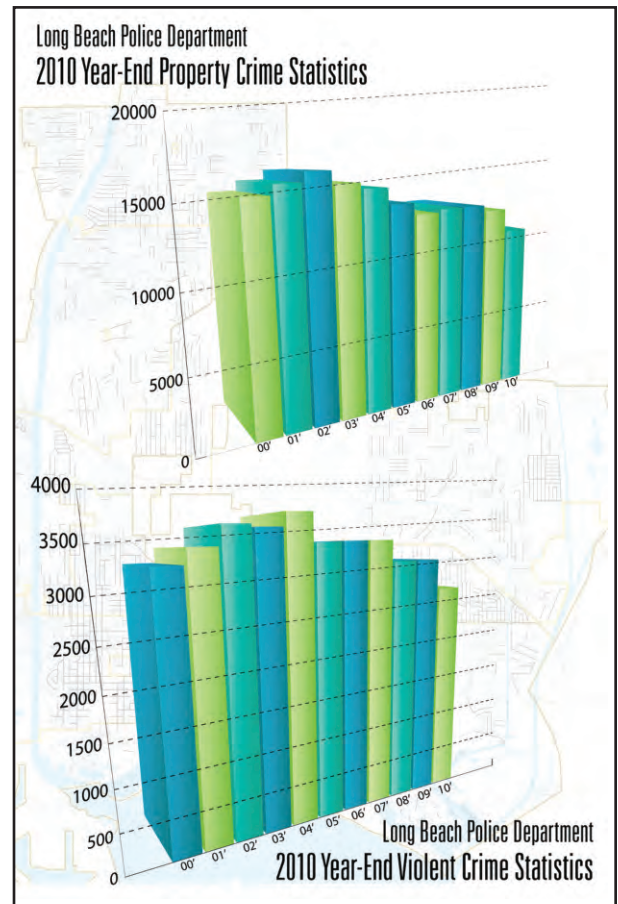
LBBJ: We see that you taught public policy at UCLA during the fall of 2008 and 2009. From your perspective, do you feel young people today are prepared to enter the workforce?

McDonnell: It was an adjustment for me when I started [at UCLA]. I had taught for 30 years in some fashion in the [police] academy in L.A. and in service training classes. The audience there is very serious and very formal. When I went to UCLA to teach, what I found was it was a more relaxed atmosphere. Everybody had laptops out on their desks . . . Initially my thought was, 'What are these guys doing on the laptop when I'm trying to teach a class up here?'

Initially that bothered me, so I would walk around the class to see what was on their screens. Some were multitasking, doing a bunch of things while they were listening, but the others I found were fact-checking. So as I'm presenting information, they are [searching] Google and they're coming out with a variation on what I was talking about. . . . I thought, 'That's interesting. I don't know that I'm supportive of that.' But the more we did it, the more I was in that environment, the more I actually liked it because they brought different perspectives, they brought different stats; they brought a richness to it by bringing in outside information in light speed that you would not have in a traditional class.

I think what we see is the young people today use technology to get information at a rate that was unfathomable when I went to school. I think that brings a lot to the table. They are not hesitant to get information from wherever they can get it, and then using that to help further their own education and understanding of the topic.

I look at young people today coming into the workforce. Are they ready? I think they are as ready or more ready than any prior generation, but I think they are very different from prior generations.



That is . . . rather than trying to change them to our way of doing things, we need to look at the strengths that they bring. First of all, try to understand where they are coming from and then harness the technology, the abilities they have and bring to the table, to be able to do the job, the mission, better than we have in the past.

The workforce today is different in the respect that they have a short attention span. They've been raised on video games and computer applications and raised on getting around obstacles. When you look at the business of policing, much of what we deal with is problem solving, and in some cases, getting around obstacles. So if we can channel the strengths that they bring to the table toward the missions we have, we could potentially have a much stronger workforce than we've had in the past.

LBBJ: Recently, the City of Camden in New Jersey laid off half of its public safety personnel due to budgetary issues. Are you concerned about large layoffs hitting Long Beach law enforcement?

McDonnell: Yes. We've been fortunate up to this point. We have reduced the size of the organization from two years ago – a budgeted strength of 1,020 – to currently a budgeted strength of 867 sworn police officers. When I look two and three years ahead, we're still in very dire straits relative to the economy. Certainly the challenges that lie ahead will be significant.

With this police department, about 85 percent of the budget is personnel. So when you start cutting back on things – we have already cut back substantially on training, on equipment, on the things that you do first – then you hope not to have to cut through the meat of it to the bone, which is the personnel . . . There is a point where you try to do the best you can with what you have, which is what we have been doing this past year with good results. But there comes a point where there are certain things you can no longer do. If you try and do everything, you can't do them as well as you would normally like to do them. So we're getting to a point where we're very lean.

If you look at how many officers we have per thousand [people]

compared to other major U.S. cities, you'll see that we're very lean in Long Beach. You can Google that. But I think the challenge we face is how do we do the best job we can with the diminishing resources. . . . [Previously we went] to one-officer units [vehicles]. What that has done is give us a 4.1 minute response time to priority calls to service, lights and siren.

That's a response time that you don't see in many major U.S. cities. That's quick. As a result, it maximizes our ability to be able to arrest people who need to be arrested at the scene of the crime. . . . The difference between a six-minute response time and a four-minute response time is often that the suspect is still at the scene when you get there. So rather than having to put a lot of time, energy, effort and resources into the follow up investigation trying to track the suspect down – meanwhile the suspect is repeatedly re-offending – if you can get that person at the scene of the crime then you eliminate much of that follow up investigation.

LBBJ: As a result of budget concerns, could you see a day when the police and fire departments would be merged under one roof?

McDonnell: I wouldn't close the door on any possibilities for what the future holds because the nature of public safety is continuously changing. However, looking at how complex the job of a police officer and a firefighter are in today's environment, the increasing level of specialty training and expertise required within the policing context is like it has never been before. Also, firefighters deal with HAZMAT situations and other challenges that require specialized training. So there would be challenges certainly in doing that. You see that being done in very small jurisdictions around the country more so than you do in major urban areas.

LBBJ: Are you pursuing other alternatives and ideas?

McDonnell: One of the things is using technology to allow us to be able to do the job in a more efficient manner.

LBBJ: What kind of new technology are you implementing to save the department time and money?

McDonnell: This year I hope to be able to have more close circuit TV video surveillance employed throughout the city. I hope to be able to use more automated license plate reader technology throughout the city. We're looking at shot spotter technology, which we would put in the areas where the violent crime challenges are greatest and the gang situation is significant. We hope to be able to advance our forensic science efforts in using technology, such as DNA analysis, to be able to focus on taking repeat offenders off the street.

LBBJ: The city manager has been pushing hard for bicycling in Long Beach. Is this a plus or a minus for Long Beach, and how does it affect your department?

McDonnell: I'm very supportive of the city's position as it relates to being the most bicycle-friendly city in America. I think it's a big plus for the city and for the lifestyle of the people within the city. There has been controversy within the past few months with a handful of bicyclists in the city who choose not to follow the rules of the road. I think what has been lost in the conversation is that there are tens of thousands of people who ride their bikes in Long Beach every week and have no issues at all with the police. They do it in a manner that is safe, they do it in a manner so they enjoy the health benefits and put no one else at risk. So we're very supportive of that, and we have an obligation to talk to those individuals and take appropriate action that choose to put others at risk by their behavior.

LBBJ: In the wake of the Tucson tragedy and other shootings, is there a law you would pass regarding firearm ownership if it were up to you?

McDonnell: No. I think we have sufficient laws on the books right now to be able to deal with the situations we face on a daily basis. The challenge is that there are about 300 million guns in America and the ease by which people can get guns is beyond what most people think it is. Our officers out there on a daily basis run across suspects who are armed with firearms, and many times the people committing the crimes using those guns, they're stolen and taken from people who kept them in their house for their own protection. I think the need to secure firearms, to keep them in a place where you can safeguard them, is very important. They certainly are a daily challenge for our officers doing their job in the field.

LBBJ: Is there anything else you would like to comment on?

McDonnell: I think much of our success is attributable to the good relationship we have with the various communities throughout Long Beach. While we attempt to use technology to extend our limited resources, policing is and always will be a people business. Nobody knows a community better than those who live in that community. So long as they feel hesitant to report criminal activity in their neighborhood, they become prisoners in their own neighborhood. The strength of gangs throughout America is based on their ability to intimidate. We are attempting, by using an anonymous tip line called TipSoft, to be able to get information from people in a manner where they are not threatened, but where we obtain information that is workable toward criminal prosecution on those that are preying on the communities that they live in. This year we kicked off TipSoft and Nixle. TipSoft is to take tips anonymously. Nixle is an opportunity for us to get our message out to the community. It's a subscription service. It's free. People can go to our Web site [www.longbeach.gov/police/] and be referred to it.

The goal is rather than for people to wonder, 'What's going on in my neighborhood?' if they have a helicopter up above, they have a perimeter set up, they shut the streets down . . . for us to be able to push out information to the public as to what's happening. Basically, rather than cursing the helicopter and the noise, people now know that there's a robbery suspect contained within the perimeter and [to] please bring your animals and pets inside the house and if you hear any activity in your backyard call us and let us know. That kind of a thing makes the community our partner in taking the suspect into custody rather than us being an intrusion into their lifestyle.

I look to this year to hopefully be able to get up a 24-hour real-time crime center. We have a great building on the eastside, the emergency command center. [We want] to be able to transform that to a center that provides real-time situation awareness for what's going on not only within the City of Long Beach, but [also] within the region, the country and the world. If an incident occurs overseas, a terrorist-type incident, to think that we couldn't have simultaneous attacks or copycat attacks would be naïve. So we want to have an awareness of what's going on and to be able to, in real time, strengthen our defenses against whatever the threat would be. ■