

Regional Grand Jury Report Circles Back on Body Camera Policy

June 11, 2018



(TNS) — For the Marin police agencies that have adopted body-worn cameras, citizen complaints have either decreased or remained level, according to the Marin County Civil Grand Jury.

The grand jury included the findings in a new report, “Body-worn Cameras and Marin Law Enforcement,” released on June 1. It is a followup to a report on the same subject in February 2014.

When the 2014 report came out, only three Marin police departments used the cameras — Belvedere, Novato and Tiburon — while the San Rafael Police Department was on the brink of launching a program. The report urged the other departments to adopt the technology.

All have except one, the Sausalito Police Department. The new grand jury report renews the call for Sausalito to get on board.

“Despite its potential downside, new technology is helping to raise public safety standards,” the report said. “Marin County has the responsibility, as well as the wherewithal, to keep our law enforcement agencies up to date.”

Sausalito police Chief John Rohrbacher said he talked to a grand juror about the issue in April, when the government oversight panel was preparing its report. Rohrbacher said the prices for the cameras had leveled off, but the department would still face onerous expenses for video storage and lost staff time for redactions.

“Since then we have obtained a cost estimate to purchase a body worn camera system,” Rohrbacher said Thursday. “It is expensive and it is not likely to be funded by our city council this coming year but remains on our wish list for the next two-year budget cycle. This month is the close of our current two-year budget cycle for the city of Sausalito and we are preparing for the next two years.”

Advocates say the cameras provide clearer documentation of police incidents for court. Moreover, they can promote better behavior by both officers and citizens, and the footage can be used for training purposes.

“I think these things are a great investigating tool,” said Tiburon police Chief Michael Cronin. “They help us preserve the most accurate record of an investigation.”

The potential downsides, the grand jury noted, include the costs of up to \$500 per camera plus much more in video storage expenses. The jury said the annual expense can be as high as \$1,927 per unit for more advanced equipment.

Another downside, the report said, was “camera perspective bias” — the idea that the footage, being shot from the officer’s viewpoint, might unduly bias a viewer toward the police.

The grand jury urged Marin’s police departments to publish their body-worn camera policies online for maximum transparency about usage, retention and privacy issues. The report said three departments — the Central Marin Police Authority, the Novato Police Department and the Fairfax Police Department — have posted their policies, but other departments have not.

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The grand jury report is available online at bit.ly/2kYiBgS.

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