

'Speed trap' argued

Angry Coburg residents heat up town hall

By MIKE LEE
of the Emerald

COBURG — The City Hall here is not the most noticeable building along Willamette Street. After passing it two or three times, a visitor will realize it also serves as a firehouse and a police station.

Last Wednesday, over 100 residents of this sleepy town, located five miles north of Eugene, gathered inside the tiny green building to display some local color: red.

Coburg's Willamette Street,

zoned for 25 miles per hour, has been labeled a speed trap by both townspeople and visitors. The Chamber of Commerce called the city council into session because the merchants are worried that police "harassment" is scaring away customers, and "respected" citizens are tired of being stopped by police.

The crowd filed into the small building, quickly filling up the 30 or so folding chairs. After sitting down, two residents excitedly recited their stories of harassment, practicing before they

would be called. A bright television light blinked on.

"Are you ready for television? Are you ready for this?" asked the first.

"No," the second quickly replied.

Police Chief Ron Crumley and the council gathered in the front of the room around an old, battered pingpong table which was flanked by the American and Oregon flags, each with a gilded eagle perched atop. Behind them was a well-used fireplace with trophies and a picture book of fire engines on the mantel. To the side, a bookshelf sat in the corner, strewn with Reader's Digest Condensed Books and National Geographic magazines.

This, in its modest splendor, was the council room. Two fire trucks were housed to the left, their rear bumpers limiting the space the bulging crowd could stand in.

"Push button for fire," a handmade sign instructed on the back wall.

The old wall clock advertising a soft drink ("Sprig — never too sweet, never too sour") showed 7:30, and silver-haired Coburg Mayor Karl McDivitt struck the pingpong table with his gavel.

"This meeting of the Coburg City Council," his voice was drowned out by the engines of the fire trucks being pulled out to make more room for the crowd.

The mayor tried to open the meeting again, and succeeded.

He surveyed the room, looking for someone to call upon to testify. He didn't have to identify people by their clothes. Everyone knew almost everyone else there — by name. Many in the crowd, which consisted mainly of middle-aged to older persons, had lived in Coburg for years.

Paul Longcoy, a balding resident whose stomach taxed his shirt, stood up to speak, keeping his back to a frustrated member of the TV crew.

He complained of the "harassment we're getting from a number of untrained people in the (police) department. The police department has been hurting Coburg without question."

He sat down, to applause.

"I wouldn't say that I've been harassed," Mark Christensen, the owner of a local well-drilling firm testified, "but I've certainly been annoyed."

He went on to describe the time he was stopped on suspicion of drunken driving.

"I don't even drink beer, and I certainly don't need to be tested

for sobriety," he complained, followed by more applause.

At the back of the crowd, two gentlemen appeared, dressed in pin-striped suits, fedoras, dark glasses and machine guns. Employees of "Capone's Limousine Service," they had chauffeured a resident to the meeting in a 1930s-era luxury auto. The resident, whom they declined to identify, wanted to show his displeasure for the police.

"We're just here to protect him," said "Big Al Capone," alias Michael Fogle.

A man grasping a yellow ticket walked up to the table.

"I was caught by surprise,"



Photo by Jimmi Harris

Shadows have fallen on the sunny town of Coburg. The city's main street has been labeled a 'speed trap.'

he said. He described the northern entrance to Coburg: a 55 mile-per-hour highway, a "speed zone ahead" sign, followed by a 25 mile-per-hour zone a quarter-mile later.

"You should call it 'speed trap ahead,'" he advised.

The crowd applauded.

The mayor recognized a woman in the back with her hand outstretched.

"My name is Millie."

"Could you step closer to the table, please?"

She did, and proceeded to defend the police and the speed limit.

"They're (the other speakers) talking about the businesses — I think they've forgotten about families," she said, worrying about the effect a higher limit would have on children playing in the area.

The crowd didn't applaud as readily for her.

The heated testimony seemed to affect the room temperature. Residents scratched their eyes, rubbed their necks and wiped their brows with handkerchiefs. Outside a couple of kids set up a lemonade stand. The television light was turned off. All that lit

the room now were the naked fluorescent lights and a large bulb attached to the antlers of a mounted deer head.

The mayor interrupted testimony to read letters of support that were solicited from other local businesses.

"If we chastise our force for enforcing our laws, we may as well not have laws," wrote Michael and Judy Mullins. Their letter didn't receive any applause. Nor did any other.

A heckler pointedly asked why all the letters were in support of the police. Crumley replied that he heard some criticisms in the letters.

Other supporters spoke up.

"The police should be allowed to err occasionally as they adjust to Coburg and Coburg adjusts to them," said Bob Pierce, the owner of the local weekly newspaper.

The mayor gave Crumley, a former narcotics officer who believes that Coburg is waking up from its small-town atmosphere, a chance to defend himself from the verbal barrage. The chief cited statistics showing that citations had risen from 34 in May to 59 this month, and added Coburg police do not stop a driver traveling slower than 38 miles per hour.

The audience gasped in disbelief.

"What do you want?" Crumley asked. "I don't think that the law specifies that certain people are not to be cited. I came here to do a job. If there is a gripe, my door has been open. Nobody has cared to use it."

Crumley did not receive any applause.

Longcoy stood up again to tell a story of a recent barn fire near his house. "There hasn't been a car by our place since Les Green got out of high school," he said.

But five minutes after the fire truck passed by, an off-duty officer's car with a small light on top sped by "at 100 miles an hour," Longcoy didn't think it was necessary.

At 9 o'clock, people were wandering off, and a few final comments were heard. The controversy wasn't settled, but the air was cleared. The offending "speed zone ahead" sign would be moved farther back, Crumley said.

One woman said she worried the media were exploiting Coburg's problem, and expressed a desire that the whole affair could be settled quietly.

She nodded toward the remaining reporters.

"They thrive on people like us," she said.

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