

Meet Your Police: Vernonia Police Chief Michael Conner

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I've held," says Conner. "It was a lot of fun. People are different when they are on vacation and they tend to treat you a little different."

In 2002 Conner was hired at the Warms Springs Police Department and attended the Police Academy that same year. He worked there until 2004.

"Warm Springs was a different experience, a different culture and I wouldn't change that experience for anything," says Conner. "In fact, I think just about anyone hired should go there and work for a couple months just to see things you will never see again and learn how to work in a different environment. I had the opportunity to investigate crimes that I will never see again—crimes I don't ever want to see again. But I received a lot of experience there."

In late 2004 Conner took a contract with the Toledo, OR Police Department, which gave him a chance to learn more about Oregon State laws. He worked for a year as a School Resource Officer, filling a position held by an officer who was serving in the military.

When that contract expired, Conner applied to and was hired by the Vernonia Police Department in 2005. He started in Vernonia under Chief Matthew Workman as a Patrol Officer, was promoted to Sergeant, served as Interim Chief and has now been hired as Chief.

"I gained a lot of knowledge working under Chief Workman," says Conner. "He was a wealth of knowledge and a really great guy to work for."

Conner is married and together they have three daughters.

I asked Chief Conner about his goals for the VPD. "I think over the last three years we've gone through some struggles between having the administration changed around since Matt Workman left (in 2008)," says Conner. Conner says he feels things have been a little unstable and that staffing levels have gone up and down. "Things started to get a little bit rocky at that point and I think there is a trust factor, between the community and the local law enforcement that comes into play. So my goal is to try to rebuild that trust—I think that is very important," says Conner.

Conner says community involvement is also a priority for his department. "If we don't have community input and support, that can make our job that much harder," says Conner. "Once we are able to rebuild the trust, we get our officers out there where they are being noticed and they are making contacts in the community, we are going to be a better department."

Conner was reluctant, when asked, to speak specifically about any personnel issues that the VPD is currently dealing with. He did say that having an open door and being transparent will be key to rebuilding trust within the community. "If people have questions they want answers to, they need to feel comfortable coming here and asking those questions," says Conner. "Changing the perception so the community has knowledge of what we are actually doing will be a huge help."

Currently only one Vernonia officer, Brent Thompson, lives in Vernonia.

In a previous interview, Vernonia City Administrator Bill Haack says he does not have a problem with officers living outside city limits. Chief Conner says he agrees with this policy. "I don't see it as a problem. Obviously there is some benefit to having officers live here. I feel it is important for the officers to have some break. This is a very stressful job. Things can happen very suddenly and we deal with death and major incidents on a regular basis. Having that time for the officers to break away from a work related environment is very important to their moral, their attitude, their well-being. They need that break so they can come back for work and be fresh. They don't need to deal with stuff while they are off duty."

Conner says that during the last year when the department was short staffed was very difficult. But as long as the VPD is fully staffed with four officers, he believes where the officers live is irrelevant to their ability to perform their job duties.

After dealing with a couple of weather related issues this past winter, I asked Conner about Vernonia's preparedness level in the event of a major disaster. Conner explained that in the event of a major disaster he would share Incident Command duties with local Fire Department staff. "As law enforcement and fire personnel we deal with what could be considered 'major events' on a regular basis," says Conner. "They are on a small scale and most of them don't require an Emergency Manage-

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