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## Each gun application must be judged, Stanislaus County Sheriff says

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An ongoing national debate over gun-carrying policies is making waves in Stanislaus County, where people in June will vote on a position closely tied to concealed weapon permits: county sheriff.

Challenger Rob Jackson addressed a gun advocacy group last month, days after the Starbucks Corp. ignited a gun-control dispute by affirming respect for customers who carry firearms where it's legal.

Sheriff Adam Christianson will get his turn April 12, two weeks before he's scheduled to ask county supervisors to raise fees for concealed weapons permits.

Both candidates are members of the National Rifle Association and say they support the Second Amendment right to bear arms. Both favor current policy giving the sheriff wide latitude when reviewing permit applications, and both refuse to sign a pledge that they say would water down that discretion.

The pledge was proposed by the Madison Society, a Modesto-based group known nationally for pushing pro-gun litigation. The group was instrumental in a 2008 U.S. Supreme Court ruling reversing a gun ban in Washington, D.C., and asked both candidates to publicly back the decision's principles when issuing permits.

Christianson said the ruling "has nothing to do with California," where loaded firearms are legal in homes and businesses. Carrying concealed weapons in public is a different matter, the sheriff said, and should remain up to the local law enforcement executive charged with judging good cause and good moral character.

The Madison Society helped the Sheriff's Department develop permitting guidelines years ago under the administration of former Sheriff Les Weidman, said society president Virgil McVicker. Since Christianson was elected in 2006, McVicker said, "he's been very difficult to deal with. We've tried to be cooperative in a positive way, but we just haven't had much luck."

Foothill counties, including the one McVicker moved to from Modesto a few years ago, seem much more willing to issue permits, he said.

But numbers cited by the sheriff indicate that a national spike in people seeking permits over the past few years is reflected here and that he has responded accordingly.

In 2007, his department received 76 applications, Christianson said. The next year, the number ballooned to 177, and then to 243 last year, he said.

The sheriff said he approved 64 applications in 2007, 120 in 2008 and 166 in 2009. He renewed 146 permits in 2007, 88 in 2008 and 178 in 2009, he said. Permits must be renewed every two years.

Some critics note that denials for first-time applications also increased, from 12 to 57 to 77 over the same three years.

The numbers don't match those used by Christianson's office in a staff report justifying the proposed fee increase, but they're close.



(BART AH YOU/bahyou@modbee.com) Public Safety Center, Minimum Unit One, Stanislaus County Sheriff Adam Christianson stands on the second floor balcony of unit B. There are 3 sections of the Minimum Unit One, A, B and C. The 64 beds in B unit are being considered for closure because of budget cuts. June 1, 2009 - Modesto Bee - Bart Ah You

### A lot of false information

Christianson said he is more involved in the process than was Weidman, personally reviewing each application packet compiled by a sergeant and an investigator. He takes interest "because I discovered a lot of false and misleading information in applications," he said.

He recently rejected a form submitted by someone he arrested on suspicion of domestic violence when working for the Modesto Police Department in 1995, after spotting his handwriting on an old report, Christianson said.

He writes his own letters of rejection, he said.

"This is a sensitive issue with a lot of folks in the community," Christianson said. "It's easier to tell people, 'You know what? I made the decision. If you're upset with it, you can be upset with me and not members of my staff.' "

Applicants who live in some of the county's nine cities may have figured their odds are better with the Sheriff's Department than with local police. Christianson can process permits for anyone in the county, not just unincorporated areas.

Of the 564 permits held countywide in 2009, nearly half -- 277 -- were issued to city residents. Christianson approved 127 for Modestans, far more than the 71 given by Modesto police.

"City of residency is not a factor in my decision," Christianson said. "They are residents of Stanislaus County and I'm sheriff of Stanislaus County."

The Sheriff's Department processes all applications as a courtesy to Ceres, which has its own police, as well as in cities that contract with the county for law enforcement, such as Riverbank and Patterson.

Christianson doesn't issue any, however, to people in Turlock, because Police Chief Gary Hampton asked him not to, Christianson said.

"As a fellow law enforcement executive, I respect his request," the sheriff said.

Hampton's department issues relatively few concealed weapons permits. Seven Turlock residents had them last year. Hampton was not available for comment Friday.

Jackson, who worked 20 years for the Sheriff's Department, said there is a perception among gun advocates that the sheriff's policy is arbitrary and based on "who you know. And a lot of times, perception is reality," Jackson said.

He said he wants to create a permitting task force, including gun enthusiasts, to develop clearer standards with no bias.

"It's going to be a level playing field," Jackson said. "It's hard for me, when we're having so much violence, to look in someone's eyes and say that public safety has resources available to protect every person, every day. People have a right to defend themselves."

Sheriff Adam Christianson is scheduled to address the Madison Society Foundation at 7 p.m. April 12 in the Stanislaus County Library, 1500 I St. The nonprofit group does not endorse candidates.

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