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Posted on Mon, May. 24, 2010

Hard to know if Stanislaus County Sheriff OKs more concealed weapon permits

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last updated: May 24, 2010 03:35:33 PM

It's too early to know whether Stanislaus County Sheriff Adam Christianson has granted more concealed weapon permits since pledging to do so before a gun group last month.

Second Amendment advocates hailed the pledge as a significant policy shift in the county, where sheriffs have been stingy with gun permits, compared with most other California counties, over the past three decades.

But Christianson's opponent on the June 8 ballot contended that the pledge amounted to a campaign flip-flop calculated to win votes. Christianson backpedaled in subsequent interviews, leaving gun-rights advocates wondering where he really stands.

"I'll be disappointed -- I won't use the term 'shocked' -- if we find the sheriff's rhetoric and willingness to sign a pledge is a campaign ploy," said Virgil McVicker, president of the Madison Society. "I'm optimistic that people can in fact do what they say they're going to do. But I really don't know what's going on."

A small sampling of people desiring gun permits is inconclusive, with evidence on both sides. The Sheriff's Department presumably could provide numbers, but Christianson did not respond to requests last week.

Christianson last year had denied the application of a former police officer who remains a firearms instructor and shooting competitor. The man was among several in the April 12 crowd who secured a promise from the sheriff to reconsider denials.

He asked that his name not be used because he works in a nonarmed public safety job and fears for his family's safety. But he said Christianson recently called him, asked a few questions and promised to approve a gun permit.

Wayne and Jane Elam, who farm almonds near Hickman, also were at the April 12 Madison Society meeting. They had never applied for permits, but were encouraged at hearing the sheriff say he routinely approves permits for farmers "because I know you guys are carrying a gun anyway."

Mixed results

Wayne Elam's permit came through recently, he said, although his wife is still waiting.

Letter writers to The Bee say they have had mixed results as well.

Dick McCaslin said he was promised a permit, but still needs to take a firearms course.

Ginger Erwin said she completed all requirements and has "a spotless background" but was turned away. She considered the sheriff's comment about farmers "infuriating."

"I, too, was told by Sheriff Christianson that he would pull my paperwork and reconsider my application," Erwin said in her letter. "I, too, was denied once again for no reason other than the fact that his decisions are arbitrary and preferential."

Background-check method

Those terms are frequently used by gun advocates who don't appreciate California law giving sheriffs and police chiefs



(BART AH YOU/bahyou@modbee.com) Priscila Rodriguez at a women's only gun safety program in Winton at the River Oaks Range with instructor Allison Spolsdoff, Saturday morning. - Modesto Bee - Bart Ah You

discretion over gun permits. Those in "shall issue" states -- which most are -- grant permits to people who pass background checks to qualify for gun purchases, removing politics and favoritism from the equation.

Firearms instructors say business picked up after Christianson's April pledge. Richard DuFour, a private investigator who teaches for the Madison Society, said he's processed about 60 customers since, roughly the number he gets in an average year.

"They jumped on the bandwagon when they heard the sheriff was going to issue," DuFour said.

Bob Winston, a Madison Society member, took a more jaded view: "Folks are trying to get applications in so they would get an answer before election day, under the theory that the policy (could) change later."

Vince Bizzini, a law enforcement academy instructor who also teaches civilians, said the Sheriff's Department has been "inundated with applications, well over 200."

Taking a 'gamble'

Gene Whisenand, an instructor with Trident Firearms Academy in Winton, said students have related success stories with permits. But he sympathizes with those who invest upward of \$300, including a safety course and Sheriff's Department fees for fingerprinting and a permit application -- with no guarantee.

"It's a gamble," Whisenand said. "It's like walking into any store and they scan your credit card for a couple of hundred bucks, then decide whether you can buy anything."

Stanislaus County Supervisor Jim DeMartini used the same rationale Tuesday while voting against fee increases for permits and fingerprints. Those applying for building permits generally know their money is safe, he said, compared with those who fork out money for gun permits "with a good chance of getting turned down."

He was outvoted by the four others; Supervisor Bill O'Brien noted that the new charge of \$100, up from \$15, still represents only a portion of the department's cost of processing applications.

State has \$100 cap

Christianson had planned to raise fees to \$115 before the Madison Society highlighted a \$100 cap in state law.

Applicants pay an additional \$95 in state and federal fees, plus at least \$100 for firearms safety classes.

O'Brien said some might be spared the expense and disappointment if Christianson were to produce a policy with more clear-cut guidelines on who gets permits and who doesn't.

But supervisors can't force elected officials -- such as a sheriff -- to do much of anything.

In August, supervisors in El Dorado County unanimously approved a resolution urging "shall issue" rules, saying budget problems are forcing reductions in law enforcement -- the same reasoning cited by Christianson in his April pledge. Affinity for gun permits has become a litmus test for candidates running for sheriff in El Dorado County, even more so than in Stanislaus County.

Turlock screens first

Turlock, where two of seven permits granted by its police chief are held by city councilmen, has been referred to as a poster child for favoritism. But its police administrators say they screen applicants before taking fees, saving unlikely candidates a chunk of money.

City Manager Roy Wasden, who developed gun permit guidelines with the Madison Society's help several years ago when he was police chief in Modesto, asked the group to help Turlock do the same just after news broke of Christianson's April pledge. On Wednesday, Wasden acknowledged his extensive law enforcement background, but said Police Chief Gary Hampton retains responsibility for gun permits.

"I support the chief," Wasden said. "I'm sure he'll arrive at a balance for the needs of the community and individuals."

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