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PACKING HEAT: Stanislaus County gun permits rise sharply after 2010 pledge by sheriff

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When Ollie Usher heard Stanislaus County Sheriff Adam Christianson publicly pledge to be more generous with gun permits two years ago, he wasn't sure whether the election-season promise was a campaign stunt or a significant policy shift.

Scores in the pro-gun audience that night probably wondered the same thing. More than a thousand people, including Usher, apparently decided to try their luck.

And nearly all won the right to legally carry concealed firearms, turning Stanislaus County into the region's latest gun-friendly place to be.

"He was good to his word," said Usher, among 1,250 people who sought gun permits since Christianson stunned the audience that April night in 2010.

Of those, 1,170 two-year permits were approved — an amazing jump compared with Christianson's previous term. For example, he approved 166 new applicants in 2009 and 446 in 2011 — an increase of 169 percent.

The sharp uptick had no echo in the county's two largest cities, Modesto and Turlock, whose police chiefs also have authority to license gun carriers. New applicants in Modesto dropped from 13 in 2009 to five in 2011, and the total number with approved permits, including renewals, dipped from 71 to 55.

Calguns Foundation, which tracks trends in California, says Stanislaus County's 81 percent increase in concealed-carry permits last year dwarfs rates elsewhere in the San Joaquin Valley. Christianson's change of heart put Stanislaus fourth among the state's 58 counties for the biggest percentage rise in civilian permits, trailing only Sacramento, Contra Costa and Ventura counties.

Christianson said publicity about his 2010 pledge, which his opponent called a campaign ploy to win votes, drove applicants to his office. He said it's too soon to tell if communities are safer with hundreds more people secretly carrying guns. But he doesn't know of a single incident of abuse by those newly licensed.

"There was concern by gun-control (advocates) that there would be an increase in lawlessness by permit holders," Christianson said. "That has not been the case."

Madison Society meeting

Christianson dropped his 2010 bombshell at a meeting of the Madison Society, a national gun litigation group based in Modesto. Not long before, he had refused to sign a Madison pledge to grant permits simply for self-protection, as had his opponent, then-Turlock police Capt. Rob Jackson.

Christianson said he reversed course in part because budget cuts were forcing him to lay off dozens of deputies; he lost 103 positions from 2009 to 2011.

"Guns are a necessary tool to combat evil," said Ron Nichols, a Modesto security consultant. "There are a lot of bad people out there and you have to meet force with force."

Some states — Alaska, Wyoming, Arizona and Vermont — require no permits, and most others issue them with minimal regulation. California is among a handful allowing discretion by local authorities who screen for "good moral character" and "good cause."

By including a political element, critics say, such rules invite abuse of power. For example, The Bee reported in 2010 that two of seven permit holders in Turlock were city councilmen; both since have left office.



JOAN BARNETT LEE / jlee@modbee.com Ollie Usher Jr. is one of hundreds of people who have taken advantage of Stanislaus County Sheriff Adam Christianson's re-election pledge two years ago to grant more gun permits. Usher is pictured at his home in Modesto, Ca., on Friday afternoon (06-08-12). - Modesto Bee - Joan Barnett Lee

Christianson's about-face roughly corresponds with a statewide trend away from stinginess, several experts said. Concealed weapon permits were the No. 1 issue in recent sheriff's campaigns in Sacramento and El Dorado counties, which are now more lenient.

Last year brought an average 19 percent increase in permit holders throughout the state, Calguns reported — far less than the 81 percent leap in Stanislaus County, but encouraging, co-founder Gene Hoffman said.

Also last year, Gov. Jerry Brown signed legislation outlawing "open carry" of firearms, reversing rules allowing unloaded handguns in plain sight. Some see that as a setback for the gun lobby; others predict it will force a state Supreme Court ruling that could affect other laws, such as those governing concealed firearms.

Meanwhile, the pro-gun camp cheers Christianson's move.

"It shows your sheriff is going along with the intent of the Constitution in letting people protect themselves," said Alan Gottlieb, founder of the Second Amendment Foundation based in Bellevue, Wash.

"If I was there, he would probably have my vote," said Mark Towber, president of the Golden State 2nd Amendment Council.

Hoffman predicted eventual victory in federal courts for more lenient carry laws and said Christianson "is going to be well-positioned when the rush comes."

Those favoring gun control, on the other hand, take a dim view of the local policy change.

"We know when guns are out there, people tend to use them and more people get killed or hurt," said John Lucas of the Modesto Peace-Life Center. He cited the February slaying of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida by an armed neighborhood watch volunteer.

"An altercation can turn into a deadly incident," Lucas said. "I just don't think it's a good thing to arm everybody."

Retiring Modesto Police Chief Mike Harden said nothing critical about the sheriff, but has not followed suit in Modesto's permitting policy.

"Let's be honest: There is a proliferation of guns in our community," Harden said. Last year, his drugs and gangs units confiscated 258 firearms.

Harden expects more public debate over streamlining the permitting process by taking control from police chiefs and giving it solely to county sheriffs.

Christianson already performs that function for Ceres and Oakdale, at the request of their police chiefs. His department also provides police protection under contract in Patterson, Riverbank, Waterford and Hughson. And he has authority to grant permits anywhere in the county — including Modesto and Turlock, whose police chiefs also issue them.

Former Turlock Chief Gary Hampton took issue with that, but the new chief doesn't. "I trust (Christianson's) judgment," said Jackson, who ran against the sheriff when the issue exploded two years ago. He succeeded Hampton in February and expects to revisit department policy on permits, criticized by many for being stingy, in coming months.

More instruction required

Awareness that Christianson will double a gun-safety training rule accounts for some of the run on permit applications. Some agencies demand up to 16 hours of instruction; Christianson has decided to require that amount, raising it from eight hours, after June 30.

"We're exceptionally busy," said Richard DuFour, a Madison Society instructor who doubled classes this month.

"I think it's a good thing," said Gene Whisenand of Trident Firearms Academy, which offers lessons in Modesto. "That's a deadly weapon you're carrying on the street. Those who want to be a cowboy can get themselves in a whole lot of trouble."

Larry Milward, a 17-year employee of Alquist Arms in Turlock, said the shop has doubled its employees from a few years ago to keep up with demand. A surprising number of new customers are women, he said.

Said Christianson: "If people are going to apply, I want them to have as much training as they can. It just makes sense."

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ON THE RISE

Last year, Stanislaus County saw the fourth-largest increase, by percentage, in civilian gun permits among California's 58 counties.

Sacramento — 233 percent

Contra Costa — 227 percent

Ventura — 104 percent

Stanislaus — 81 percent

Stanislaus' jump was much more significant than neighboring counties.

Stanislaus — 81 percent

Merced — 22 percent

San Joaquin — 21 percent

Calaveras — 18 percent

Mariposa — 11 percent

Tuolumne 3 percent

Statewide average 19 percent

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