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Gun owners press Stanislaus County sheriff to speed up weapons permits

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STANISLAUS COUNTY --]

Gun owners on Monday grilled Sheriff Adam Christianson for taking so long to process concealed weapon permits, but warmly applauded him for being much more generous with them in recent times.

"We do our best to keep the process moving," Christianson told members of the Madison Society, some of whom are anxious because appointments for permit interviews are stretching into 2014.

Applications in Stanislaus County have soared since President Barack Obama promised to push gun control legislation after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Conn., the sheriff said. That has created a backlog of background checks to be done by the department's skeleton staff, Christianson said.

Republican senators blocked the president's push, which was not popular with Monday's crowd filling Harris Moran Seed Co.'s lunchroom in the Beard Industrial District. When the sheriff asked how many have civilian gun permits, almost everyone raised a hand.

"We've got a lot of guns in this room, don't we?" Christianson said, drawing laughs and applause.

The last time he appeared before the Madison Society — three years, 10 days ago — Christianson was in the middle of a re-election campaign and the crowd was not happy that he had not long before refused to be less stingy with gun permits. The sheriff stunned the audience that day by announcing he had changed his mind, and since has stood by his word to grant them to people of "good moral character" who present logical reasons.

A Bee review last year showed an 81 percent increase in Stanislaus County permits in the preceding year — fourth highest among California's 58 counties and a far greater increase than anywhere else in the Central Valley. Christianson had granted 1,250 permits since making the pledge two years earlier.

He did not have updated numbers Monday; the Madison Society's Virgil McVicker said about 1,800 applications are in the pipeline.

Despite hundreds more people packing heat in these parts, the sheriff said, "there hasn't been a single case of anyone who has abused the system or the privilege." He has revoked some permits after learning of carriers behaving badly, he said, noting incidents involving alcohol.

Christianson said a real estate investor once drew his weapon and detained a man until authorities arrived. The man had lost his home and surprised the businessman by remaining in it illegally, said the sheriff; one of his deputies and a locksmith were gunned down a year ago by a distraught man being evicted after foreclosure.

"Does the fact that people have the ability to protect themselves and defend others give bad guys a moment of pause? I hope so," Christianson said, but he pleaded with people not to be trigger happy.

Bob Ferrel of Turlock said he must wait until December for a permit appointment, and Nora Buhler of Modesto said hers isn't until February. Christianson noted that he lost a fourth of his staff to budget cuts, but said his department recently brought on 16 recruits — the first significant hire in about five years.

Christianson has said he decided to grant more permits partly to help people defend themselves, with fewer deputies and more criminals on the streets since state officials began reducing prison populations a couple of years ago.



Elias Funez/efunez@modbee.com Sheriff Adam Christiansen speaks to folks at Harris Moran Seed Co. in Modesto Monday (04-22-13) evening to educate and answer questions regarding concealed weapons carrying permits. - Modesto Bee - Elias Funez

He scoffed at the idea of federal officials ordering sheriffs to confiscate assault rifles or semiautomatic weapons. "I don't think the feds are going to come get me," the sheriff said. "I've got better things to do, like chasing gang members, rather than go after law-abiding citizens for what I consider kind of useless, unnecessary legislation."

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