Police get training on two wheels

Bicycle patrol course opens up new avenues for area law enforcement

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APTOS — Rumbling down stairs, weaving through cones and peeling up hills Friday, law enforcement officers finished a three-day bicycle patrol course at Cabrillo College.

Sheriff's deputy John Habermehl ran the course, which taught 21 officers and deputies from agencies in Santa Cruz and Santa Clara counties.

Bikes have some advantages on patrol cars, Habermehl said, such as navigating large crowds at events. They also can give officers a more stealthy approach to suspects during investigations.

"They can go into problem areas that cars can't," Habermehl said of the mountain bikes. "An officer on a bike also can appear less intimidating to residents and facilitate a conversation."

"It's just a nice option," said UC Santa Cruz police detective Linda Robinson. "People see you and you're more approachable."

She added that bikes are often faster around the UCSC campus than cars because they can use narrow paths. Capitola police, UCSC and sheriff's deputies at Cabrillo College often use bikes.

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for patrols. Other agencies are trying to revive the use of bikes.

On the course's first day, riders pedaled about 28 miles around Rio del Mar, Capitola and other areas. They wore duty belts and carried other equipment as they would on patrol.

The rides were tiring and scenic, they said.

In a Cabrillo classroom and around a parking garage on campus, they learned how to jump curbs, ride down stairs and turn at sharp angles. The mountain bikes issued from the law enforcement agencies varied widely in age.

A Hollister police officer, Bo Leland, said he removed a broken electric motor from his bike because it was "dead weight."

He hoped to take on some bike patrols in his city's downtown because it might be easier to maneuver.

Sheriff's deputies, State Parks rangers and California Highway Patrol officers took part, as well as police from Santa Cruz, UC Santa Cruz, Capitola, Watsonville, Hollister and Mountain View.

"What I like to see is the positive reaction with citizens," said Katherine Comessana, a Mountain View police officer who participated in the training. She likened the bikes to a mounted patrol in which she once participated. "It gives the same interaction with people."

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