

Segway, bikes bring Los Lunas officers closer to the community

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LOS LUNAS

For many, the sight of a police squad car sends a chill up the spine. These highly charged cruisers seem to be the equivalent of a rattlesnake ready to strike for whatever transgression was committed.

As a way to make police officers more human, visible and responsive to the community, and as a way — let's say even a sneaky way — of combating crime, the Los Lunas Police Department has added two new modes of transportation to its fleet.

The department has purchased a Segway and a fleet of bicycles that for law abiding citizens provide a conduit for conversation, but for criminals they've proven to be devices the bad guys didn't see coming.

The Segway is a scientific wonder that allows an officer to stand on the two-wheeled vehicle that is propelled when the officer leans forward. It stops when the officer leans back, and in some wondrous way, the vehicle and passenger maintain their balance, even while standing dead still.

"What I like about the Segway is the agility, quickness and response," said Detective Johnny Cappelli, coordinator of the Segway and bicycle patrol. "If there is a foot chase, the officer has all his energy."

"I find it easier to maneuver around crowds because I've been at a bunch of football games," said Officer Michael Romero. "You can stand still on a Segway and move slowly and observe."

The bicycles can also be

considered the product of modern science. With their carbon-fiber frames, shock absorbers and disc brakes, they offer a light, fast and highly responsive vehicle.

"The public is more willing to talk to us," said Officer Jesus Sedillos. "In a police car, people are more intimidated to come up to us and talk to us."

Each vehicle has multiple uses.

They can be used for patrolling shopping centers, neighborhoods, school grounds and parks. They make appearances at community events, parades and sporting events, Cappelli said.

Jesus Sedillos, a traffic enforcement officer, has used the Segway, which travels up to 16 miles per hour, to enforce the speed limit in school zones.

Also with the Segway, merchants love to have the machine roam the aisles to discourage shoplifting.

One such foray into Lowe's nabbed a shoplifter, Cappelli said.

Many merchants have become sponsors by allowing the officers to recharge the electrical Segway in their business, which costs them pennies.

The Segway has a range of up to 11 miles, Cappelli said.

The visibility of both modes of transportation could well be their greatest strength.

"I'm a school resource officer and I use both the Segway and the bike as a tool to help patrol the high school and middle school," said Officer James Rich. "It gives high visibility. The kids stop and ask questions. It's not just a patrol tool, but it's a community policing tool as well to help outreach to



Curt Gustafson-News-Bulletin photo

LOS LUNAS POLICE OFFICERS James Rich, left, Michael Romero, Johnny Cappelli and Jesus Sedillos are part of the department's Segway and bicycle patrol. These new tools of transportation offer effective crime-fighting tools and a way for officers to be visible and communicate with the community.

the community."

"People like seeing us on the Segway and bike because they find them more interesting than seeing a police officer riding in a unit," Sedillo said. "People like seeing law enforcement out and enjoy us being in the community because for them we're very approachable."

Such approachability has

yielded fruit.

While on bike patrol in a neighborhood that had experienced burglaries, some kids came out and said, "Are you guys looking for somebody — he just ran into that house right there," Cappelli said.

Although the Segway or bicycle has high visibility, it also is far more concealed than

a squad car.

"With the Segway or the bike, you can roll quickly upon the action," Rich said. "You can take people by surprise."

"In one incident, (another officer) and I rolled up to this guy who's doing copper (thefts)," Cappelli said. "We're right next to him and we go, 'what's wrong?' He said, 'I just

stole some copper.' It's an awesome tool."

It's also a good example of whether you're a crook or an upstanding community member, the Segway and bicycle promotes conversation.

"People honk, wave and stop you," Cappelli said. "They humanize a police officer."