



# The Times

## City cops spar over parking tickets

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BY KEVIN SHEA

TRENTON -- The city had a particularly busy schedule of events downtown this past Friday night.

Mayor Douglas H. Palmer was hosting a leadership meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors at the Marriott hotel on Lafayette Street and the Trenton2Nite program had a slate of live performances nearby along South Warren Street.

People were everywhere, which the city craves.

Just after midnight on Saturday morning, however, a city police officer issued about a dozen parking tickets to illegally parked vehicles in and around the hotel, touching off a series of events that included an angry confrontation between the officer and two superiors, one of them embattled police Capt. Paul Messina.

The officer, Mike Davis, charges through police intermediaries that Messina, who was on duty, smelled of alcohol and appeared to be pressuring him to void the tickets. During the same incident, police Sgt. Adrian Mendez asked him to "take care of" one ticket, he alleges, because it was issued to a vehicle operated by a City Hall employee.

Police sources say the officer is readying an official complaint to internal affairs.

Yesterday, Police Director Joseph Santiago addressed the situation, in which he lays blame mainly on the officer, but a little on Messina's demeanor. Santiago said flatly that Messina had not been drinking because he'd been in his company Friday night.

Police regulations did not allow Messina to comment to the media, a police spokesman said yesterday.

Santiago said the issue stretches back to questionable ticketing patterns by the officer, whose name he did not use, and includes how city police treat people who come to downtown events.

"Do we really want to give parking tickets to people who come to events downtown?" Santiago asked.

The answer is no, he said, because it undermines the overall issue of community policing, he said.

And that is the point Messina and Mendez were trying to make Friday night in front of the Marriott, Santiago said yesterday.

Police sources representing Davis and Santiago both say the officer issued lawful tickets and that they were legal and that Messina and the officer had a confrontation.

But then those sources disagree.

Sources say that after Mendez talked to Davis, Messina stepped in to the situation and tried to bully the officer into erasing the tickets. Davis was transferred to a new post starting the next day and told to leave his K-9 dog at home.

Davis also contends he was acting under police memorandums to specifically patrol the area around the hotel last weekend, as well as standing verbal orders from commanders to produce documented work, including parking tickets.

Santiago said the officer was not transferred, but reassigned to another patrol post the next day, switching patrols with another officer. He confirmed the officer was told to leave his K-9 dog at home.

As for the direction about how to enforce the area of the hotel, Santiago supplied a memo Messina wrote specifically for patrolling the hotel area this past weekend and it mentions a variety of possible crime suppression actions and for officers to remain at "high visibility."

"The issuance of tickets was not the paramount duty," Santiago said yesterday.

Officers were assigned to the hotel area this past weekend because a large number of visitors were expected, but also because of some recent car break-ins in the area, Santiago said.

The incident that touched off the ticketing, Santiago said, was the 8 p.m. Friday break-in of two cars near the hotel where one victim had to wait almost three hours for a response from police.

Santiago, who was at the hotel at the time, inserted himself in that issue at about 11 p.m. Friday and questioned police supervisors about how that could occur, he said yesterday.

Messina was part of the discussion because he was running police operations in and around the hotel this weekend, Santiago said.

One of the explanations from supervisors, Santiago said, was that many officers were tied up at the scene of a homicide that occurred on East State Street at 7:30 p.m.

Police sources say Davis was among them and was told to respond from his hotel post to the homicide so his K-9 dog could help search the area.

Later that night, back at the hotel, the officer issued at least 10 tickets from 12:20 to 12:55 a.m. Saturday, Santiago said.

Santiago said he believes the officer was aware that he and Messina were upset at the police coverage at the hotel during the break-ins and went on a ticket blitz in retaliation.

Santiago said the officer has a recent history of issuing blasts of tickets in areas the police would be better off not targeting, in terms of building community relationships, such as in Mill Hill or in front of churches on Sunday mornings.

"It appears this officer has a proclivity to hand out parking tickets ... that are not needed," Santiago said. Twice this summer, complaints about the officer's ticketing habits were investigated by internal affairs, but the complaints eventually withdrawn, the director said.

The fact is, Santiago said, that police do engage in selective enforcement, and issuing parking tickets in front of church on a Sunday morning or at a downtown event -- provided the car is not blocking traffic or in front of a fire hydrant -- is not what city police need to be doing.

Davis' friends on the force say Davis was busy at the homicide scene and unaware of the car break-ins or that Santiago and Messina were upset about it, and that parking tickets are usually placed on cars, not given to people, so officers rarely know who they are ticketing.

They charge Santiago is trying to deflect the situation from Messina.

For Davis, police officers say, the issue is Messina trying to bully the officer into making legally written tickets go away and being verbally abusive and smelling like he'd been drinking.

Santiago conceded that Messina "has a pretty big target on his back" and people and officers might try to engage him and then "tape him or quote him" in some situations.

In August, Messina served a five-day suspension for inattention to duty following the posting on the Internet of photos of him sleeping at work. The photos appeared just months after a video of Messina sleeping on duty in November 2003 popped up online.

Santiago said he will be speaking to Messina about the confrontation and will tell him that, "he may need to modify his approach (in certain situations)."

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