

# Navassa police chief defends officers' actions



Navassa Police Department Sgt. Scott Perez talks with the driver of a tractor-trailer he stopped for speeding while on patrol last week in Navassa. MIKE SPENCER/STARNEWS

## Residents claim they're targeted at checkpoints

By Adam Wagner  
StarNews Staff

NAVASSA — The radar on Navassa Sgt. Scott Perez's cruiser begins blipping rapidly as an oversized dump truck draws near and

quickly whooshes past on Cedar Hill Road.

Here, the speed limit is 45 mph. The truck was clocked at 60 mph.

Perez whipped his car around in a nearby driveway, put the pedal to the metal, apologized to a couple of passengers for the "popo driving" and flipped his blue lights on as he neared the truck.

As he approached the truck's cab, Perez, who operates the



Navassa Police Department Sgt. Scott Perez runs a driver's license tag while on patrol last week in Navassa. MIKE SPENCER/STARNEWS

SEE POLICE, A5

# POLICE

From Page A1

department's sole radar detector, said, "I clocked you at 60 in a 45. Any reason you're in a hurry?"

Speeding, which the truck driver admitted to, is not uncommon in that area. Cedar Hill residents sometimes complain, Perez said, about not being able to back out of their driveways.

Stops like this one, though, are causing complaints among some residents, some of whom stood up at July's council meeting to say Navassa officers made drivers sit in their vehicles for 15 minutes before informing them of alleged infractions and are targeting certain people at checkpoints. Preston Howell, Navassa's police chief, is adamant that those charges are baseless.

If there is occasional tension with residents, Howell said, it stems from officers' actively enforcing speed limits in the town for the first time in years and ensuring that drivers have the proper paperwork and license plates.

"My officers have never been complained about for saying racial slurs or using force against somebody or threatening somebody," Howell said. "They get complained on because (residents) got a ticket."

None of the people who spoke during the July meeting's public comment session responded to phone calls from a reporter.

Eulis Willis, Navassa's mayor, refused to discuss any tension between the department and his town's residents.

"I do not want to talk about the relationship between the police department and the town," Willis said.



Navassa Police Department Sgt. Scott Perez talks with the driver of tractor-trailer he stopped last week for speeding in Navassa.

MIKE SPENCER/STARNEWS

## Speeding in the town

Records indicate that every speeding ticket issued in Navassa between July 1 and July 24 was for someone going more than 15 mph over the speed limit.

Typically, Howell said, his officers will let drivers off with a warning if they are less than 15 mph over, but he'd like to start bringing that number down eventually.

"We wanted to find some way to give people an opportunity to start learning because nobody started enforcing a speed limit until I came," Howell said.

Most of the people police cited in July weren't Navassa residents. Statistics compiled by Howell — who had to hand count citations because the department doesn't have a computer system — show that between July 1 and July 24, the town's police officers wrote 62 citations to 50 drivers. Of those citations, police wrote 17 to Leland residents, 16 to Wilmington residents and 10 to Navassa residents.

Still, police targeting Navassa residents was among the accusations made at July's town hall meeting.

"We have a complaint procedure in place so they can go over there if they think we're wrong and fill out a form, but they won't do it because if you read the

last line, it says if we find this misleading, untruthful, or you're filing a false report, you will be arrested for filing a false report," Howell said. "They're going to town hall and telling the mayor."

## Community relations

Navassa's police department has been historically plagued with trouble. A former chief was charged with driving while impaired in 2008. An officer was charged with rape and assault in 2010.

And from July 2012 to May 2013, the town didn't have a single officer.

Howell was sworn in on May 16, 2013. Since then, the town has added two other full-time officers and four auxiliary officers.

The police department has an open-door policy for residents, Howell said, but the town's lack of sidewalks and houses set far back from busy streets make it difficult to do traditional community policing.

"There's really no way you can get out and walk up and down the streets, so you ride through and wave to people and you stop and talk to people," Howell said. "But it's hard to do the type of community policing that most towns do."

One way the department will soon try to change that was the suggestion of Perez, who suggested allowing drivers to bring their cars to

the police department, 334 Main St. in Navassa, every Tuesday from 4 to 6 p.m. to let policemen check their cars. The program will soon be advertised on the back of residents' water bills.

Officers will check basic driving necessities like insurance, licenses and registration. If a driver doesn't have insurance, Howell said, he or she won't be allowed to drive away, but if a license or registration is expired, the driver will receive a warning ticket and be given 10 days to rectify the problem.

"That way they can't argue, 'I didn't know.' You know if your license is revoked," Howell said. "You know if you've got no insurance, you know if your tags are expired. You know these things."

— Contact Adam Wagner at 910-343-2096 or via email at Adam.Wagner@

An advertisement for a store named "50 S". The top part of the ad features a photograph of a smiling woman with short, light-colored hair, wearing a pink patterned top, holding a baby wrapped in a blanket. To the right of the photo, the word "Food" is written in large, pink, cursive letters. Below the photo, the letters "50 S" are displayed in a large, bold, white font on a pink background. At the bottom of the ad, the text "GET IT" is written in large, white, bold letters on a pink background. Below that, in smaller white text, it says "LOCATED IN THE 'KEY WEST' 7208 WRIGHTSVILLE".