Incoming TPD police chief shares some insights
November 21, 2015 • By Carmen Duarte cdurarte@tucson.com

Come January, Christopher Magnus will become chief of the Tucson Police Department. Magnus, 55, is chief of the Richmond Police Department in California where he began working in 2006. The city near San Francisco has a population of about 108,000 and a police force about a third the size of Tucson’s.

Richmond Mayor Tom Butt said Magnus turned Richmond around by lowering its homicide rate, strengthening the police department through training and improving morale among officers, and, “most importantly,” building trust between the community and police.

This list of accomplishments led to a unanimous vote Tuesday from Tucson’s Mayor Jonathan Rothschild and the City Council to appoint Magnus as chief.

Magnus, who was the preferred candidate of the citizens advisory committee that helped conduct the chief’s search, will replace Chief Roberto Villaseñor when he retires in December. The other top contender to replace Villaseñor was Malik Aziz, deputy chief of the Dallas Police Department, who was favored by far by the Tucson Police Officers’ Association but withdrew his name from consideration for the job.

Magnus will be paid $200,000 a year, and after one year will receive a raise. Also, as part of his benefits, the city will contribute $10,000 annually into a deferred compensation account, City Attorney Mike Rankin said.

The Star recently asked Magnus to address some issues he’ll be facing when he becomes chief. Here are his answers (sent via email).

Q: What is your biggest challenge when you come to head the TPD, with some 900 sworn officers and 300 civilian personnel? You have a yearly $168 million budget. There are 81 job openings and a wave of retirements facing the department. TPD is authorized for 992 commissioned officers.

A: While I realize the Tucson Police Department faces many challenges related to budget, personnel retention, ongoing retirements and the need for updated technology and other equipment — among other things — it’s too soon for me to make a judgment about exactly what my one biggest challenge will be. My plan is to meet with many different members of both the department and the community to gain a greater understanding of the department’s strengths, resources and challenges. Once I have a better understanding of what’s going on, then I will be in a stronger position to set priorities, establish goals, and address needs.

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Q: What improvements do you believe are needed, and what changes do you foresee making?

A: In general terms, I think all police departments can improve when it comes to relationship-building with the community, but I am very impressed with the community policing work that has already been done in Tucson, and I have high regard for Chief Roberto Villaseñor.

I realize officer morale is an issue, understandably related to compensation, equipment and retention issues. These problems will not be solved overnight, but if the officers’ association can work in a thoughtful and constructive way with management, I am confident we can make progress.

I currently work for a city that has had significant and sustained budget challenges. Despite these problems, we have been able to obtain grants, build public support and use a number of creative means to address public safety and officer morale issues.

Q: You are a strong supporter of community policing. TPD leaders were also strong supporters of community policing, but slowly it was eroded because of budget cuts and the elimination or reorganization of units and officers. How do you propose to bring it back?

A: Community policing should ultimately be about how every member of the department does their job. It’s not about a particular unit — and it’s not even about any particular approach to “agency reorganization” that achieves strong relationships with the community. I was able to build a culture of engagement with the community in Richmond even when budgets were tight and personnel numbers were very limited.

I am looking forward to strengthening TPD’s community policing efforts and I am confident I will be working with the best possible group of police officers to make this happen.

Q: How can you work to turn around low morale among employees in the police department? Much of the low morale, officers say, is based on increased workloads, low pay with no raises in seven years, increased (employee) contributions for pension and health care which leads to smaller paychecks, and difficulty in keeping more experienced officers who are leaving for higher-paying jobs.

A: I hear these concerns loud and clear and appreciate how frustrating they are to the TPD rank and file. Tucson is facing budget problems that many other cities are also dealing with. It’s encouraging that Tucson is dealing with its financial challenges now and in a forthright, transparent way, rather than taking the easier approach of “kicking the can down the road” or spending beyond its means.

I am very committed to working with the city manager, City Council, and members of the Tucson Executive Leadership Team to explore every possible means of addressing the city and the Police Department’s financial needs. I have good experience obtaining grants. I’ve also been part of many successful endeavors to raise funds locally to meet departmental and community needs.

I don’t intend to make promises I can’t keep — especially without having a solid understanding of the department and the city’s finances at this point — but I plan to make one of my top priorities addressing morale at TPD and being responsive to officer concerns.
Q: The Tucson Police Officers’ Association backed another candidate and raised concerns about your tenure in Richmond. How do you plan on working with the union and getting its support?

A: I believe it is in the mutual interest of the TPOA and me to work together — especially given the number and complexity of issues facing the department. This doesn’t mean we have to agree on everything, but it does mean we should look for common ground whenever possible.

I am confident that the great majority of TPD personnel will withhold a rush to judgment and instead take the time to get to know me.

I think this is a very professional police department with an extremely dedicated group of sworn and civilian personnel. I look forward to working with all of them. Whatever concerns some of them may have voiced during the selection process is of no consequence to me now. I’m just happy to be joining the team.

Q: Please explain your decision to partake in a “Black Lives Matter” demonstration in Richmond, which some TPD officers criticized because they felt you took sides rather than remained neutral.

A: I’m not sure how acknowledging that “Black Lives Matter” is anything more than standing up for what should be a self-evident truth. In Richmond, as well as many other cities, there are many residents of color who have felt marginalized and disrespected by the police over the course of their lives. That’s just reality, whether some folks like to acknowledge it or not.

The only “side” I took holding the sign while a mom took a picture of me for her child was the “side” of police respecting and hearing the community we serve. Of course all lives — and certainly police lives — matter as well. But on that day, people in my community were looking for tangible proof that their city and their police were sincerely committed to building bridges and establishing better relationships with African-American residents going forward.

My act of holding that sign wasn’t political — it was community policing in action. I respect the opinion of those who disagree with me, but I believe I did the right thing under the right circumstances.

Q: Can you share some personal information? Is your husband happy about the move here? Do you have children? What are your hobbies, and what do you do for relaxation? Name some of your favorite books, films and sports teams.

A: I’m 55 years old, married to Terrance Cheung (who I’ve been with for 10 years) and we have two really terrific dogs that are as excited about coming to Tucson as we are.

Terrance and I are a team, so we made the decision to come to Tucson together. Terrance worked much of his career as the chief of staff for an elected Contra Costa County Supervisor. He took the job as the mayor of Richmond’s chief of staff about a year ago. He has been active on a range of important community issues and has a background in broadcast journalism. He hopes to find a job in Tucson.

We enjoy walking our dogs, traveling, getting involved with the community and spending time with our families.

I have many favorite books. Some of them include “Leadership on the Line” by Heifetz and Linsky; “A Tale of Two Cities” by Charles Dickens; and everything by Langston Hughes. My favorite sports team (sorry, Phoenix) is the Detroit Red Wings.

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