

# NEIGHBORHOOD Gazette

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## Chief Murtha & 2020: 'Throw The Playbook Out The Window'

■ By Mike McKibbin

Like everyone, 2020 had a few surprises for Chris Murtha. After he joined the Wheat Ridge Police Department as its new chief last February, the coronavirus pandemic and social justice rallies and protests caused him to “throw the playbook out the window.”

“All the goals and plans I had in mind were kind of put on hold,” Murtha said in an early December phone interview. “But I was very pleased with the staff and the moral compass of the agency. I knew we had the people that could handle it.”

His hiring by City Manager Patrick Goff was announced in January, following longtime chief Dan Brennan’s July 2019 retirement. Murtha said he decided his first goal would be to understand and get to know the city and the people in the community.

“That’s happened a little less due to COVID-19, but the people I have had a chance to talk to have been very outgoing,”

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**WHEAT RIDGE LUTHERAN MEDICAL CENTER'S FIRST BABY OF THE NEW YEAR:** Margaret Johnson was born at 12:10 a.m. on Jan. 1, to Erica and Greg Johnson, weighing in at 6 lbs., 11 oz. She has six older siblings. Pictured with the family is the obstetrician/gynecologist that delivered her, Dr. Douglas Minton. PHOTO COURTESY LUTHERAN MEDICAL CENTER

# Murtha

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he stated.

Instead of in-person conversations, Murtha held Zoom meetings. He was also asked to improve internal communications, which Murtha said he addressed by trying to be more open with staff members and transparent in his decision making.

The department of more than 100 officers already had a strong community policing approach, he added, which he took another step to “relationship policing.”

“It’s moving the partnerships we have to more of a relationship, more transparent and collaborative,” Murtha said. “That involves a lot of relationship-building from the bottom up, so the street cops are more on the front lines.”

## Department survives COVID-19 cases

After the pandemic hit Colorado, Murtha said the department adjusted its business model from top to bottom.

“We looked at how we should protect ourselves and the public, when working at home made sense so we only interacted personally when it was necessary,” he stated. “Some things like traffic stop investigations weren’t done in certain cases so we could be

sure we were protecting the public.”

Department school resource officers handled phone reports on low-level crimes as well, Murtha added.

For the first seven months, the department had no positive coronavirus cases.

“We put protocols in place, made sure officers had (personal protective equipment), set up decontamination stations for equipment and vehicles and our janitorial staff made sure everything was clean,” Murtha explained.

Meetings and roll call were also reduced, but cases surfaced in October.

“We looked at all our contacts for tracing and I’m pleased to say we found none of concern when it came to the public,” Murtha said. “We had many people in quarantine but there was never a cluster of cases, they were spread out over 5-6 weeks.”

While 13 cases were diagnosed among officers and staff, he noted the department was always able to fully staff a shift, although overtime was used at times.

“We had plans to deal with an outbreak, but they were never needed because we got a quick handle on things,” Murtha said. “We also have resource sharing agreements with Arvada and Lakewood but didn’t need to bring in outside help.”

As of early December, no COVID-19 or coronavirus cases were present in the police



Chief Chris Murtha

department and no more test results were pending, he noted.

## Minnesota “could never happen” in Wheat Ridge

In the spring, the killing of a Black man, George Floyd, by a white Minneapolis, Minn., police officer rocked the country and caused rallies and sometimes violent protests. Murtha posted a message to the community on June 1 that said he felt “angered and frustrated by that officer’s actions.”

“We will protect lives. We will intercede in violent confrontations. We will protect residents exercising their First Amendment rights. We will not allow lawlessness.

We will be compassionate. We will be thoughtful. We will treat every member of our community with respect. We value the diversity of every individual who lives, works, shops, or plays in our community.”

And Murtha said he found the department met law enforcement-related community concerns.

“We already had a high degree of accountability and second-generation cameras are worn at all times by officers in uniform,” he stated. “Our policies already had called for a duty to intervene and our training and orientation has always been toward less use of force. We haven’t used chokeholds for about 30 or 40 years.”

Still, Murtha said he reached out to marginalized community members and had the head of the Aurora chapter of the NAACP address department supervisors. A local community advisory group also held an online town hall meeting to allow residents to discuss social justice, systemic racism and related issues. Department policies were also posted online, Murtha added.

“We wanted to explain why we feel things like what happened in Minnesota could never happen in Wheat Ridge,” he said. “I think the department has done a pretty thorough job of weeding out any actions that might lead to anything like what happened to George Floyd.”