Police praise DWI, bar laws

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LAFAYETTE — Police officials here are pleased with the results from new laws passed to get the drunken driver off the streets and to close bars earlier.

Police Chief James Romero said the number of calls for help made to police is down, while the number of burglary arrests has increased since the December enactment of the new law forbidding alcoholic beverages to be sold after 2 a.m. Bars are also required to close at 2:30 a.m. under the new law.

The number of calls to the police department between the hours of 2 a.m. until 6 a.m. has dropped to 470, compared to 536 complaints in January of last year, he said.

“A significant amount of criminal activity is related to alcohol,” Romero said. “Where there’s alcohol you'll likely find more fights, shootings and stabings, more domestic disturbances and more accidents and fatalities.”

In addition, he said, since the Lafayette Alcohol Traffic and Accident Campaign began in late December the number of DWI arrests has increased by 58 percent.

The ATAC program’s enforcement branch funds two full-time officers assigned to DWI patrol and two other officers on part-time DWI watch. The special patrol made 60 cases in January, Romero said.

A van which will allow officers to patrol with a blood-alcohol instrument will soon be on the road to help speed up the time it takes for a DWI case to be logged, he said.

The rest of the patrol division made 53 DWI arrests, for a total of 113, compared to the January 1982 DWI total of 66, he added.

Burglary arrests also have increased, Romero said, including many arrests made while burglaries were in progress. Before the new laws, he said, officers would be tied up with breaking up fights at bars or completing the necessary paperwork in DWI cases.

“And so far — although I hate to speak too fast — fatalities and homicides are fewer than this time last year,” he said.

Romero’s officers agree with his assessment.

“We see where we have a decrease in the number of calls,” said Capt. Anthony Navarre, patrol division commander.

“We’re not dealing with as many drunks. Now people are beginning to limit themselves in their drinking,” Navarre said.

An effect unanticipated, he said, was the increase in parties held at homes, which usually are more controlled since the guests are invited and expected.

“They don’t fight, and they don’t tear up the place,” Navarre said. “We’re very happy with the results we’re getting so far.”

A shift commander, Capt. Paul Stelly, who coordinates the department’s operations between 11 p.m. and 7 a.m., said about 60 burglaries have been cleared in January, in addition to 18 felony burglary arrests made during the commission of the crimes.

“The new laws have better than knocked the number of calls in half,” Stelly said. “There are not as many disturbance calls at homes at 4 or 5 in the morning. We’ve been able to concentrate on our work.”

Other ordinances passed late last year by the City Council and credited for the welcomed statistics include an open-container law, increased penalties for selling alcoholic beverages to minors and a law giving police the right to search bar patrons for weapons.