THE PALM SPRINGS POLICE DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF POLICE

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW
FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS PARADE INCIDENT

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of an Administrative Review is to analyze the events leading up to a problematic event and determine how best to prevent future incidents from occurring. The review does not determine whether someone violated department policy; rather, it examines the factors that may have led to a tragic event. Data was collected, interviews were conducted, and reports were written by multiple administrators in the police department to be compiled into a report for community consumption.

A separate Internal Affairs investigation is taking place to examine potential violations of policy. If policy violations are identified appropriate disciplinary action will be taken. Additionally, a criminal investigation was conducted by the California Highway Patrol and that investigation was sent to the District Attorney for review and possible issuance. The Palm Springs Police Department was kept abreast of the investigation, but did not participate as investigators.

II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On December 7, 2024, Palm Springs hosted the Festival of Lights parade for more than 100,000 community members of the Coachella Valley. The 2024 parade was the 29th annual parade. The parade route stretches more than one mile, and people sit along the curb line, in bleachers, and on restaurant patios and apartment balconies to watch the festivities. The parade began shortly after dusk with 153 entries.

Typically, police motor officers lead the parade to signal its beginning and to clear people out of the streets for vehicles and parade participants transiting through the downtown area. Traffic and Motor officers have been part of this parade for 29 years. Officers write an Operations plan for each large event, and that plan gives direction to all law enforcement personnel working the event. A briefing is held to ensure a thorough understanding of the Operations Plan by all staff members.

During the parade on December 7, motor officers conducted numerous slow-speed, tight turns along the parade route, including multiple figure “8’s.” During this event, several officers also rapidly accelerated for short distances to lighten the weight on the front of the motorcycle lifting the front wheel off the ground. They refer to the technique as “bumping up.” Each of the four motor officers bumped the front wheel off the ground for short distances. Officers were not trained for, nor sought approval to bumping up during crowded events like the Festival of Lights parade.

Shortly before the beginning of the parade, officers conducted turns and bumps without coordination or clear communication with one another. As one motor officer attempted to perform a bump along the east curb line of 200 North Palm Canyon Drive, another made a tight turn nearby. The officer pulling his front wheel up lost balance due to the merging motorcycles and fell off the bike, which slid into the crowd, injuring 11 people. Officers immediately called for paramedics and ambulances while triaging the most visually severe cases and administering first aid to the injured officer and bystanders.

The scene was immediately secured, and the incident commander called for the California Highway Patrol to investigate the collision as an independent third-party agency. Numerous sections of the CHP studied, reviewed, and opined on the investigation. Ultimately, the California Highway Patrol sent a completed investigation to the Riverside District Attorney for review. The case is still under review.

III. KEY FINDINGS

1. **Unauthorized Maneuvers:** The Palm Springs Police Motor Unit has performed motorcycle maneuvers without management approval since 2019. The complexity of the maneuvers increased with time until a point where unauthorized “bump-ups” were performed in a crowded closed-course street environment.
2. **Supervisory Awareness and Inaction:** All senior police managers were aware of or should have been aware of motor officers entertaining the crowd at the Festival of Lights parade and other public functions. Any manager or police executive could have and should have stopped the practice. Those who observed the behavior should have called a halt to it. Those who were unaware because of a lack of attendance at events, as a leader, should have been present.
3. **Mission Drift:** Officers strayed from the central mission of crowd control and parade escort to entertain the crowd by performing unnecessary exercises for entertainment. Entertainment is not the mission of the police.
4. **Breakdown in Communication:** Motor officers lacked a means of direct and careful communication while performing high-risk maneuvers.
5. **Normalization of Risky Behavior:** Other participants in local parades also entertain the crowd through risky behavior and often violate the vehicle code. This practice should stop immediately and event organizers who knew about the stunts should have stepped in to prevent them from taking place.
6. **Inadequate Span of Control:** Additional oversight, at the supervisor and manager level, is needed for Special Events. This includes sworn and civilian functions of parades and events.
7. **Officer Fatigue:** Two additional events utilized specialized motor officer skills that required the officers to work overtime on the same day as the parade. Riding a motorcycle in a high-risk environment is taxing. Long hours with multiple days of overtime caused fatigue and possibly was a contributing factor.

IV. Recommendations:

1. **Policy Reform:** Create a clear city policy that prohibits all parade participants, including police officers, from any behavior that could potentially endanger the rider, other parade participants, and especially spectators.
2. **Enforce Operational Boundaries:** Institute a clear policy for city staff working events with large crowds that strictly prohibits entertainment or maneuvers that may put others at risk of injury. Also, limit the speed of all vehicles, including police and fire, to no greater than 15 mph outside of a clear emergency.
3. **Improve Command and Control:** Ensure tighter command and control by police supervisors and managers at all large events. A clearly defined ratio of supervision to staff should be stated and a captain-level police manager should be present and in charge of all large events.
4. **Create a Fulltime Special Events Position:** Dedicate a full-time special events supervisor to focus on potential issues and problems presented by large crowds in a confined space. The combination of managing the Traffic Division and Special Events and Planning is too big of a responsibility for one person.
5. **Instill a Fatigue Management Protocol:** Define a process that determines when fatigue from working back-to-back events and shifts puts the rider and community at greater risk.
6. **Improve Communications at Events:** A clear method of communication between the Traffic sergeant and Motor Officers during events.
7. **Retrain Management and Supervisors on Incident Command Structure:** All department supervisors and managers should be retrained in the Incident Command System to determine the span of control and essential functions.

V. BACKGROUND

Mission Type

The mission's purpose was to perform traffic and crowd control, escort the first float, and prevent people from venturing into the roadway during the event. Crowd control was to be performed ahead of the parade at slow speeds by four motor officers, two quad vehicles, and two marked patrol cars. All vehicles had emergency lights activated to warn pedestrians of approaching vehicles and act as a deterrent to people crowding in the street.

Location and Topographical Factors

The motor officers drove north on the 100 and 200 blocks of North Palm Canyon Drive followed by a marked pickup truck equipped with an In-car video camera. The camera was activated and recorded the event.

There were no obvious or observable obstacles or road impediments that would have caused the accident. The weather was calm, warm and dry. There was ambient lighting from streetlights and headlamps of motor vehicles.

The 300 block of North Palm Canyon, where the accident took place, was crowded with spectators as there were viewing stands, wider sidewalks near the Hyatt, and access from side streets. The crowd was three people deep on most of the sidewalks. People occasionally crossed the streets, transiting to the other side. Many people had chairs and other items of comfort. All ages were present at the parade.

Equipment involved in the collision
The vehicle involved in the collision was a 2024 BMW R 1250 RT-P. The BMW model is driven by all PSPD motor officers. This BMW has dynamic traction control, preventing the wheel from rising more than 12 inches off the ground. When the bike senses the front wheel rising off the ground, the dynamic traction control reduces power output, forcing the wheel back to the ground. According to a CHP (Major Accident Investigations Team) MAIT investigation into the mechanics of the motorcycle, there were no mechanical problems with the bike that would have caused the crash. Mechanical failure does not appear to be a primary factor in the collision.

The other motorcycles were tested for traction control, and the test demonstrated that the control was working on all PSPD motorcycles. Tests were conducted on three motorcycles, and each time, when driving at a low speed, the front wheel was mechanically forced back to the ground during rapid acceleration. The braking traction control mechanics worked well.

Whiskey Throttling (AndrewT, 2021), the driver pulls hard on the accelerator after losing balance on the bike, causing the bike rider to lose control. The pull of the accelerator can cause the bike to pull its front wheels off the ground as appears to have been the case in this incident.

VI. TRAINING AND PREPAREDNESS

Driver Experience and Training
Four motor officers were on duty and working the parade. All four officers were on motorcycles working in the parade. The average tenure in the department was 12 years. The average time in the Traffic Division was 2.5 years. Each person has more than 5,000 hours of riding time in the unit and an estimated 7,000 hours of riding experience before deployment. Everyone attended at least one California Peace Officers Standards and Training (POST) certified motor officer riding course.

Certified Motorcycle Training Academy
The training is conducted by a Certified Motor Training Officer (CMTO) and is approximately three weeks. The CMTO provides one-on-one instructions to the trainee. The CMTO discusses and demonstrates safe riding practices, all applicable cone patterns, the four P.O.S.T. required testable cone patterns, paired riding techniques, enforcement riding practices, and any other

applicable riding techniques and/or practices. After the trainee has completed the training, the trainee will be approved to attend the Certified Motorcycle Training Academy.

The certified motorcycle training course provides officers with the essential skills needed to operate law enforcement motorcycles safely and efficiently. The program combines foundational and advanced training to ensure readiness for real-world law enforcement applications. The course is 80 hours and is POST-approved. The motor officers have attended the following academies: Fresno Police Department, Orange County, San Berardino County, and the San Diego County Sheriff's Department's motor officer courses.

Fundamental riding techniques are a key focus, with officers mastering balance, throttle management, and basic riding skills such as low-speed maneuvers, braking, and cornering. These foundational skills are reinforced through controlled exercises and real-world application scenarios, preparing officers for the dynamic nature of traffic enforcement.

The course objectives emphasize comprehensive knowledge of law enforcement motorcycle operations, including policy, legal, and moral considerations. Officers develop psychomotor proficiency, demonstrating sound judgment and decision-making in high-pressure situations. Additionally, they gain a deep understanding of vehicle dynamics, ensuring they can maneuver safely and efficiently in both controlled training environments and active public roadways.

Advanced Motorcycle Training at CLASS
Each officer attended the Advanced Motorcycle Training Class. One officer attended and passed the motor officer instructor's school. The focus is on transforming riders into smoother, safer, and more confident operators through a structured approach to advanced motorcycle skills. The program is designed for intermediate and advanced riders who want to elevate their skills, whether for personal development or professional applications, such as law enforcement. This is an eight-hour course and includes the following.

Core Skills Development: CLASS instructors emphasize the fundamental dynamics of motorcycle operation, focusing on:

1. **Braking**: Riders learn to transition from throttle to brake with precision, practicing smooth deceleration that enhances control and can save lives.
   Shifting: Proper gear transitions to maintain balance and responsiveness.

2. **Cornering**: Techniques for entering, apexing, and exiting turns with efficiency and control.

3. **Body Positioning:** Riders are taught how to use their body to assist in steering and stabilizing the motorcycle. Proper positioning reduces fatigue, enhances control, and increases confidence during high-speed maneuvers.

4. **Throttle Management:** Effective use of RPMs to maintain positive control of the bike is emphasized, helping riders stay steady and responsive in dynamic situations.

Additionally, there were in-service training classes managed by the team. Typically, they would ride with other law enforcement agencies exchanging information about riding in complex environments such as crowded venues, freeways, and roads with shape curves and turns. Monthly officers had department training for motor officers. This training was designed to reinforce essential skills required for operating a police motorcycle, such as slow speeds, rapid cornering, and surface assessment.

Documentation of Training
To maintain accountability and track officer progress, all training sessions, certifications, and proficiency assessments should be thoroughly documented. Currently, there is a lack of consistency in the collection of this data. To ensure compliance with department policies and POST standards while providing a reference for future evaluations and training improvements, the Training Division should retain a lesson plan for each session.

Training for Crowded Events and Parades
Given the unique challenges presented by high-density environments, additional training is incorporated to prepare officers for navigating motorcycles in crowded areas such as parades, public gatherings, and large-scale events. This training emphasizes:

- **Crowd Safety Awareness:** Ensuring officer awareness of pedestrian movement and potential hazards.
- **Emergency Response in Crowds:** Practicing safe and efficient responses to emergencies in congested areas.

By maintaining detailed training records and providing specialized instruction for event-related deployments, the Traffic Division ensures its officers are well-equipped to handle both routine traffic enforcement and special event duties with professionalism and efficiency.

Driver Condition
Fatigue of the drivers was examined. It was not a regularly scheduled workday for motor officers. Instead, officers were brought in on overtime for the Santa Paws race. They worked from 7:30 a.m. until 12:00 p.m. After a short break, they were brought back in to clear the parade route of vehicles.

The week of the FOL crash, the motor officers averaged 22.5 hours of overtime. One worked 28 hours of overtime in addition to their regular shift. One officer had 16 hours of overtime in the previous 24-hour period. One officer attended the funeral of a close family member the day before the collision. (Maciag, 2017)

An analysis of drivers demonstrates that all officers have experience and are well-trained, capable motorcyclists. They were sufficiently trained through certified classes common among all law enforcement agencies in California, some having advanced courses in ridership. However, fatigue has been demonstrated to increase the presence of serious collisions.

Communications Command and Control

All communications were handled by Tactical Frequency #3 and had an assigned dispatcher. The primary frequency was reserved for the rest of the city. SWAT officers were on a separate radio frequency that was accessible to the talk group. During the parade, there were 75 officers assigned to the primary talk group, tac 3. With increased numbers on a talk group/channel, there is reduced availability for officers and supervisors to communicate directly and frequently with staff. This presents a safety concern for parade attendees and staff. Should a critical incident take place the ability of first responders is greatly diminished. Therefore, it is important to have adequate bandwidth for large incidents and the ability for supervisors to communicate directly with officers. Thus, a need for a reduced span of control.

VII. SUMMARY

The accident resulted from a series of unfortunate and regrettable behaviors that led to a critical incident. Behaviors occurred that cannot and will not repeat. PSPD will take the lead to ensure each of the policies, training requirements, and organizational desires are fulfilled and report back to the City Manager on their implementation.