TO: HONORABLE CITY COUNCIL

FROM: CITY MANAGER DEPARTMENT: POLICE

DATE: MAY 24, 2004 CMR:284:04

SUBJECT: SUMMARY OF THE MOUNTAIN LION INCIDENT

This is an informational report and no Council action is required.

BACKGROUND

Early in the morning of May 17, 2004, there were several sightings of a mountain lion in the residential area around Rinconada Park. After searching for the lion for about seven hours, the lion was observed jumping over a fence on Walter Hayes. About an hour later, the lion was located up in a tree a short distance away. In the interest of public safety, the lion was shot and killed. Since then, there has been a significant amount of misinformation, speculation and rumors that have resulted in hundreds of people contacting the City and the Police Department. The purpose of this report is to provide the Council with an accurate and detailed account of the incident, the chain of events, the resources the Police Department consulted, and the rationale that lead to the shooting of the lion.

DISCUSSION

On Monday, May 17, 2004, at 4:45 a.m. the Police Department received the first call from a newspaper delivery person reporting a mountain lion in the 500 block of Coleridge Avenue. The lion was hiding in the bushes. After attempting to determine the validity of the call, officers initiated a yard-to-yard search. At 5:40 a.m., two residents reported seeing a mountain lion in the area of Cedar and Parkinson. It was seen running down the street. In light of the fact that there were two very recent mountain lion attacks on horses in the lower foothills and due to the fact that a predawn sighting of a mountain lion in a highly populated residential neighborhood is extremely rare, there was great concern for the health and safety
of the community. A field command post was established in the parking lot of the Arts Center on Newell Road and the Incident Command System (ICS) was activated to coordinate command and control of the incident. The on-duty police lieutenant assumed the roll of Incident Commander and began making requests for assistance and appropriate notifications. At this time of the morning, Palo Alto Police staff numbered only five officers, a sergeant and lieutenant.

Contact was made with the on-duty Fire Department Battalion Chief, Palo Alto Animal Services staff, and California State Fish and Game (CSFG) personnel (Attachment A). CSFG has only 19 staff that cover a six county area and on the morning of the event, it only had three staff members on duty. Therefore, after notification, it informed staff that due to lack of staffing resources, it would not be able to respond. However, continual consultation with CSFG via telephone occurred during the course of the day. Assistance was also requested and provided by Mountain View, East Palo Alto, and Menlo Park Police Departments and Stanford Department of Public Safety. By 6:00 a.m., requests for assistance had also been made to Palo Alto Open Space staff and Santa Clara County Department of Environmental Health Vector Control, which responds to calls about wildlife, rodents, and mosquitoes. The California Highway Patrol’s fixed wing aircraft responded to assist in the search, but due to the tree canopy, its efforts were futile. The City’s Naturalist and a representative from Vector Control responded to the command post to assist.

At 7:40 a.m., a resident reported seeing a mountain lion in the 800 block of Whitclem Drive in the south end of town. Palo Alto Animal Control Officers responded to this call but found no signs of a mountain lion. This was the only reported sighting of a mountain lion in the south end of town and as such cannot be confirmed.

Because staff knew that schools in the area would open soon, the Associate Superintendent of the Palo Alto Unified School District was contacted and advised of the situation. Police officers called the following schools to notify them of the situation:

- Addison School
- Walter Hayes School
- Palo Alto High School
- Gunn High School
- Duveneck School
- Saint Elizabeth Seton School
- International School
Staff’s primary concern in the early morning hours was the safe passage for children walking and riding to school. Staff took up fixed posts at key locations near the schools, watching for any signs of the mountain lion.

To better understand the potential danger of a possible mountain lion attack and the scope of the problem facing the community, staff relied heavily on wild animal experts for information on mountain lion behavior. Staff learned mountain lions are the largest native North American cat except for the slightly bigger jaguar. The cats are known by a number of different names including cougar, panther, painter, catamount and puma. They are primarily nocturnal, shy, elusive and solitary, except during the breeding season and when young are traveling with their mother. They are agile tree climbers and are very fast animals over a short distance, but because of a relatively small lung capacity, cannot run great distances. They are able to jump a six to eight foot fence in one bound. They prefer to hunt at night and deer are their favorite prey but they have been known to prey on other small mammals such as rabbits, skunks, domestic livestock, and pets. Larger animals are usually killed by a bite to the back of the neck. Adult male home ranges often encompass more than 100 square miles. Females usually occupy ranges from 20 to 60 square miles. The mother raises her young alone and trains them to hunt. The young stay with her 18 to 24 months then disperse to find their own home areas.

As mountain lions compete for space with the human population that is rapidly increasing and as housing developments have encroached on traditional lion habitat, the number of attacks on human beings has increased. Information obtained from captured mountain lions reveals that the lions seem especially drawn to children, most likely because they act like prey. A mountain lion is normally a quick, quiet and efficient killer. A person within 20 yards of the mountain lion is considered to be within attack range. They drop silently, have the ability to spring 15 feet vertically and leap 45 feet horizontally.

The mountain lion is classified as a specially protected mammal in California. The California Department of Fish and Game may remove or take any mountain lion or authorize an appropriate local agency with public safety responsibility to remove or take any mountain lion that is perceived to be an imminent threat to public health or safety.

Staff consulted the wildlife experts from the respective agencies about the alternatives to subduing and capturing mountain lions. Additionally, contact was made with the Interim Police Chief in Morgan Hill to determine how it recently handled three mountain lion sightings in that city. One option that was explored was of the use of a tranquilizing agent. Staff learned chemical immobilization is used for capture purposes under only very
controlled circumstances and that many factors must be considered before even attempting to tranquilize a mountain lion. Unlike what is frequently portrayed on television, the effect of tranquilizers on mountain lions differs from animal to animal. In most cases, it takes anywhere from 20 to 30 minutes for the chemical to take effect. During that time, the animal may become agitated and is usually mobile and has the ability to jump fences and cover significant distances. In some cases, the tranquilizer has no effect. In Morgan Hill, it took six shots of tranquilizers to subdue the lion.

Staff learned that when darting a free range animal, a rifle or pistol is the best weapon to use. The choice of drug and appropriate dosage is the next consideration. Although dosage is based upon weight, other factors such as physical health and level of stress contribute to the success or failure of the anesthetic. There will be occasions when the initial anesthetic agent does not provide adequate immobilization or when the effect of the anesthetic agent begins to wane before the lion is able to be captured. In these cases, there is heightened danger for all individuals in the area. Oftentimes the darted animal is startled and immediately takes off running. It is impossible to predict where an animal will run or what behavior it will demonstrate. As the drug starts to take effect, the animal may become confused and more defensive as it feels itself loose control.

At 12:10 p.m., a third sighting of a lion was reported jumping over the fence at 941 Newell Road. Staff again contacted the schools in the area and requested the children be kept inside during their lunch period. A yard-to-yard search was conducted in the 900 block of Newell Road. At that time, staff initiated the process of activating the City’s community alert system.

Before the system could actually be activated, however, a fourth sighting was reported at 12:40 p.m. in the 200 block of Walter Hayes. At 1:05 p.m., the lion was located asleep in a tree at Walter Hayes Drive and Walnut. Officers observed the lion and a request was made by the officer to shoot it. At that time, a considerable number of news media and residents were in the immediate area. While an officer present at the scene was in possession of a tranquilizer gun, based upon the information noted above that attempting to tranquilize the animal could create an even more dangerous situation for the public, the order was given by the ranking supervisor to shoot the mountain lion with a lethal round. While the lion was not ready to attack as has been reported by some newspapers, this action was taken due to the mountain lion’s inherent threat to the community by being in a heavily populated residential area. Because the mountain lion was in a tree about 15 feet above the ground, a very safe trajectory of fire existed, up and away from surrounding homes and bystanders. The weapon used by the officer was an AR-15 rifle equipped with an advanced sighting system. This rifle uses a .223 caliber frangible round that breaks up upon impact and is less
likely to continue past its target after impact. By selecting this rifle, staff was able to use the most effective weapon to take the safest, most accurate shot given the circumstances. At 1:06 p.m., a single shot was fired and the mountain lion fell out of the tree. It ran about 40 feet, fell over and was pronounced dead at 1:07 p.m. No other shots were fired and no injuries or damage to property was reported.

Santa Clara County Vector Control and Palo Alto Animal Services took custody of the animal and transported it to CSFG facilities where a necropsy was conducted. The results of the necropsy revealed that the lion was a 99 pound male, three years old, slightly underweight with an empty stomach. There was no indication of rabies and tests are continuing for other diseases. The bullet hit both lungs and the heart. The lion’s ability to travel any distance after being shot was most probably the result of a high level of adrenalin in his system. According to the veterinarian who conducted the necropsy, the location of the shot resulted in the most humane death. While it is unfortunate that this protected animal had to be killed, it is important to emphasize that police staff did not make the decision lightly as some have suggested and not without first obtaining a considerable amount of information of what would be in the best interest of the members of the community.

Since the incident, a number of additional questions have been asked including the following:

**Why wasn’t more time allowed to elapse before shooting the lion since it was sleeping and up in a tree?**

Because the entire operation had taken nearly eight hours before reaching a point where the lion was actually located and some action could be taken, staff did not want to take the chance of allowing the lion to escape again or worse, attack a person on the ground. As noted above, an attempt to shoot a moving lion that was on the ground would have significantly jeopardized the safety of everyone in the vicinity.

**Why wasn’t the community alerting system activated to warn residents?**

At the time of the initial two sightings, due to the few number of officers on duty, the focus was on getting additional police units in the area. After the third sighting, the focus shifted to notification of the schools. The arrival of the news media resulted in staff responding to their requests for information. With all the associated activity, staff did not think of activating it until right around the time of the third sighting.
Are there any more mountain lions in the area?

Since the shooting of the lion, there has only been one unsubstantiated sighting of a mountain lion in the 4200 block of McCellar. There have not been any other reports.

How was the lion able to travel from the foothills to the residential areas undetected?

Staff theorizes that the lion traveled down San Francisquito Creek bed from the foothills.

How will the Police Department respond in the event of another sighting or incident?

If there are reports of any additional sightings and after officers are able to determine that the report is credible, a search of the area will be conducted. Residents in the area will be notified via the community alerting system. Neighborhoods where an email list-serve exists will be contacted in order to get the word out via the Internet. If another mountain lion is located, after weighing all the factors, staff will take the action that is in the best interest of the safety of the community. The Police Department will always put the safety of humans first.

Staff will be meeting with CSFG to learn any additional information and to finalize plans for the future should this or a similar event occur.

Attachment A: Chronological Summary

PREPARED BY:

BRAD ZOOK
Police Captain, Field Services Division

DEPARTMENT HEAD:

LYNNE JOHNSON
Police Chief

CITY MANAGER APPROVAL:

EMILY HARRISON
Assistant City Manager
### ATTACHMENT A

#### SUMMARY TIMELINE OF EVENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4:45 a.m.</td>
<td>First sighting of mountain lion (500 block Coleridge).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:40 a.m.</td>
<td>Second sighting of mountain lion (Parkinson &amp; Cedar; L/S towards Newell). Palo Alto Fire Battalion Chief notified via communications. Palo Alto Animal Services, State Fish &amp; Game notified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Police units begin yard-to-yard search in area of last sighting. Completed @ 7:45 a.m.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:45 a.m.</td>
<td>Police Detective makes personal contact with all three affected local schools in the area. (Duveneck Elementary, Jordan Middle School and St. Elizabeth Seton’s private school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:46 a.m.</td>
<td>CHP fixed-wing air unit scanned the area with negative results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Afternoon Police shifts were called in and requested to arrive @ CP no later than 11:00 a.m. (some resources arrived earlier).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:40 a.m.</td>
<td>Mountain lion sighting reported in the 300 block of Whitelem Drive in South Palo Alto.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Transition of operational periods. Many First Operational Period personnel (Graveyard) released from the scene and cleared to go off-duty. Second Operational period begins command, perimeter and search.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:10 p.m.</td>
<td>Third sighting of mountain lion (941 Newell Road).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:11 p.m.</td>
<td>All three schools in area directed to be in “lockdown” mode during lunch period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:22 p.m.</td>
<td>Yard-to-yard search continues (Newell Road and Walter Hayes).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:40 p.m.</td>
<td>Fourth sighting of mountain lion (291 Walter Hayes Drive).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:05 p.m.</td>
<td>Police officer advises the mountain lion has been located. (Walnut Drive @ Walter Hayes).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:06 p.m.</td>
<td>Request via radio for confirmation from CP to dispatch the animal. Request confirmed. Animal dispatched.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:07 p.m.</td>
<td>Police supervisor confirms mountain lion has been killed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>