

Chief Ankeny, you have no right to remain silent

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Chris Ankeny may well turn out to be one of Lewiston's most accomplished police chiefs.

Just the same, he's not good enough to hold himself - and his department - beyond the reach of public accountability.

Nobody is that good.

Yet, that is precisely what Ankeny would pursue with his proposed 72-hour news blackout.

From noon Friday until noon Monday, neither you nor anyone else not carrying a badge will know what's drawing the cops' attention - and how or if they're responding.

Sirens disturb your sleep early Saturday morning? Wait until Monday to discover whether it was anything to worry about.

Squad cars and cops huddled around a neighbor's home Friday evening? It may have been a welfare check. Or they could have been serving a warrant. But you have no need to know - at least not until Monday.

A phalanx of officers surrounding a convenience store Sunday? Was it a robbery? Did the culprit escape? Are you in any danger? Is there anything you know that the cops don't? For at least another 24 hours, you'll have to rely on rumors.

Wake up Saturday to a string of parked cars along your street with new scratches, dents and dings? Was a pack of vandals to blame? How much damage did they cause? Just wait until the start of regular business hours Monday. Then Ankeny will answer your questions.

Does that car banged up in a Friday afternoon accident look like one an acquaintance owns? Until Monday, you're stuck with guesswork or gossip.

And on this Fourth of July weekend, if you're not sure whether that noise is coming from firecrackers or gunshots, just go away. The cops don't want to bother with you. Wait until the holiday passes for an answer.

There is an exception.

If there is a "major event," Ankeny assures you he will issue an alert.

And who decides what constitutes a "major event"?

The same police chief who concealed the names of two officers wounded in a gun range mishap and who now wants to seclude his agency's building behind a privacy fence.

Is it a "major event" if one of his officers crashes his motorcycle into a storefront window - or does that embarrassing detail remain under wraps throughout the weekend?

Is it a "major event" if a cop shoots and wounds a family pet?

Is what defines a "major event" in the chief's mind this weekend going to be subject to revision two months from now?

At a time when most law enforcement is concerned with pursuing community policing, Lewiston's department is striving to be an outlier.

Elsewhere, you may find cop shops that maintain up-to-date accounts of arrests on their web pages.

Or police officers who rely on body and dashboard cameras.

Or even police who are humanizing themselves, forging person-to-person relationships with members of the public and their representatives in the media.

Everyone understands how difficult a police officer's life can be.

But we give cops the power to deprive a person of his liberty, possessions and, on occasion, his life. With such authority must come accountability - and an increasingly skeptical public is insisting upon it.

Elsewhere, Ankeny's peers know openness is crucial to the public confidence they need to perform their jobs.

You have to reach back to George Orwell's newspeak to explain an agency that claims on one hand to protect and serve while the fellow at the top informs people paying his salary: "Don't call us; we'll call you." - M.T.