

'It's nice to have an officer look out for another officer in that way.'

Scott Mangold, Powell city councilman

Arthritis forces retirement of police K-9

BY CJ BAKER
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One of the Powell Police Department's drug detecting K-9s has been forced into retirement after suffering from severe arthritis.

Zeke, an 8-year-old German shepherd, began having trouble with his left elbow around the start of the year, said his handler, Powell Police Officer Reece McLain. The joint later swelled up to the point that Zeke could no longer put weight on that leg.

"It's not fair to him to ask him to continue to work," McLain told the Powell City Council at its Jan. 21 meeting. The officer asked that the dog be allowed to retire and to stay at his home.

"He's become part of my family," McLain

said of Zeke,

choking up.

"He's a great

dog."

Zeke worked

for the de-

partment for

roughly five

years, respond-

ing to drug

calls not only

in Powell, but

in surrounding

communities like Cody that don't have a

K-9.

The dog's most prominent case came in February 2014 — not long after he began



Powell Police Officer Reece McLain's K-9, Zeke, recently had to retire because of severe arthritis in one of his legs. He's now the McLain family's pet. Courtesy photo

working with McLain. It was then that Zeke alerted to the scent of narcotics on a suspicious plane at Yellowstone Regional Airport. That alert helped Cody police obtain a search warrant for the aircraft and the pilots' hotel room, where they found and seized more than \$260,000. The men were later convicted of felony crimes and both the cash and the airplane were later forfeited to the government; the Powell police department is receiving a chunk of the

proceeds.

Over the years, Zeke was called upon to detect drugs in vehicles and other locations — including sniffing out heroin at the Northwest College mailroom after a student had the drug shipped to campus in 2017.

But when McLain reflects on the duo's work, he thinks of a case that never made the news.

With Zeke's help, officers had caught a teenager with a sizable amount of marijuana, along with evidence that the youth was planning to distribute the drug.

"Everything was there" for a successful prosecution on felony criminal charges, McLain said. But law enforcement officials ultimately decided to give the teen another opportunity.

"It was one of those times where, you know, let's see where a second chance goes," McLain said — and "it paid off," with the young adult now thriving.

"That," the officer said, "was the biggest, most rewarding [case] to me."

Working with a K-9 opens a lot of doors, McLain said — not only in the types of cases an officer gets to work, but also just in starting conversations in the community.

"You tell a grade school kid that there's a police dog in there [a squad car], and you see their eyes get real big," he said, adding that, as a general rule, "everybody likes to talk about dogs."

The transition to retirement hasn't been

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'He'll still find something to chew up every now and again. He's doing pretty good.'

Reece McLain
Powell police officer

Zeke retires: Department's other K-9, Niko, remains on duty with Sgt. Chad Miner

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easy: Although Zeke has been out of service for well over a month, "when I get into the car, I find myself wanting to talk to him," McLain said last week.

He's brought Zeke to the station a few times since the dog's retired, though "I'd say most of that is for me."

At the January city council meeting, Councilor Scott Mangold said it's always tough when a K-9 or officer is forced to retire.

"The dogs become a part of a police force, but they also become part of the family," Mangold said.

He said the council appreciated McLain's willingness to continue caring for the K-9 in retirement.

"It's nice to have an officer look out for another officer in that way," Mangold said.

After a brief discussion, Councilwoman Lesli Spencer made a motion "that Zeke gets to stay with his family."

"... For as long as he wishes," added Council President Jim Hillberry.

The vote was unanimous.

"He's yours," Hillberry told McLain.

The officer said he'd take care of all the subsequent veterinary bills for Zeke, but Hillberry suggested the city would help.

The community has supported the department K-9 program for years, McLain added, including with Powell Veterinary Services providing care and Linton's Big R — now Murdoch's — providing food.

"We live in a pretty good town," he said.

As for Zeke, the retiree has been figuring out how to navigate the McLains' home on three legs, enjoying his "big, soft bed" and getting into occasional mischief.

"He'll still find something to chew up every now and again," McLain said. "He's doing pretty good."

The department's other K-9, a Dutch shepherd named Niko, remains on duty with Sgt. Chad Miner. In the meantime, the department is beginning to search for a replacement for Zeke.

McLain said he hopes he'll get a chance to be the new dog's handler.

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K-9s like Zeke — pictured here at a 2016 open house at the Powell police station with Office Reece McLain — are always a big draw at police events. McLain said the dogs often help start conversations in the community. Zeke has retired after about five years of service to the Powell Police Department.

Tribune file photo by CJ Baker