

County is a safe place to be on New Year's Eve

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Five people died in New Jersey last New Year's Eve— four of them pedestrians— from drunken driving accidents.

But none of the accidents were in or near Sussex County, and Dec. 31 is not the DWI-laden night the casual observer might expect, local police said.

"Over past few years, New Year's Eve has been quieter than other times of the holiday season", Newton Police Chief John Tomasula said.

County residents seem to be aware of the high number of patrols on the traditional party night, and many plan a designated driver or stay the night at their host's house.

The night before Thanksgiving is more troubling to Newton Police, for example, because many college students come home and go to bars with old friends.

"We focus on those areas, because there's less of a public awareness at those times," he said.

The chief was referring to the dangers of impaired driving, and Stanhope Police Chief Steve Pittigher also believes drivers "have gotten bright enough not to drink and drive," especially on New Year's Eve.

"We have more of a concern for Super Bowl Sunday," Pittigher said, illustrating the surprisingly low amount of activity on Dec. 31.

Nonetheless, police are not taking the DWI offenses lightly on a night where the champagne flows freely.

Many local departments are putting extra patrols out for New Year's Eve instead of sobriety checkpoints. Hopatcong will have three patrols instead of one, and Sheriff Robert E. Untig assigned five sheriff's officers as a DWI patrol of areas not covered by a municipal police force.

Sparta and Newton Police said they will have adequate staffing to cover their roads.

"We're three and a half square miles, and we'll have four cars out there," Tomasula said. "That's not bad coverage."

Barbara Meltz, a member of the county chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, said she's glad if the officers' comments mean people are getting the message.

Still, people should take caution and avoid misconceptions about alcohol consumption, she said.


"Most people think that somehow beer is different than other alcohol," she said. "It's the alcohol content of whatever you're drinking that matters."

The state Division of Highway Safety notes that 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine and 1 1/3 ounces of hard liquor contain roughly the same amount of alcohol.

Sussex County residents who travel outside the county on New Year's Eve should note there will be "substantially more" sobriety checkpoints than on regular weekends throughout New Jersey, according division spokesman David Wald.

A San Francisco-based company is touting its new handheld breathalyzer as a way to "ring in the New Year, not an attorney."

Drivers blow into the "BACtrack"— which is about the size of cell phone — for four seconds and read their digitally displayed blood-alcohol content within two seconds, KHN Solutions President Keith Nothacker said.



The device does not have a mouthpiece and users hold it a half inch way, making it good for sharing, Nothacker said.

The company notes that a reading under the legal limit of .08 BAC does not mean people should feel free to drive.

"That's something we're very sensitive to," Nothacker said. "In the instruction manual we say, 'Do not drink and drive,' play it safe."

KHN Solutions sells the device at bactrack.com and plans to hit retail shelves soon.

Meltz said she has seen handheld breathalyzers and tried one out a couple of times.

"If someone was in the bar with a group of friends, and one of them saw they were close to .08...if that would stop them from driving, it would serve its purpose," she said.

But a person who blows a readout of .06 or .04 should not be driving either, she said. "You know if you're impaired."