

The Register-Guard

Q&A with Eugene Police Chief Chris Skinner

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Posted at 2:19 PM

Updated at 2:19 PM

On Tuesday, Eugene Police Chief Chris Skinner marked six months with the police department by sitting down with The Register-Guard to talk about important issues and the future of the Eugene department.

His answers have been lightly edited and condensed.

Question: You've been in Eugene for six months. How is it going so far?

Answer: I feel more connected to this community in the first six months than any other experience I've had before. This is the second time I've done the chief thing, so I kind of knew what to expect, but I've been really encouraged by what I see. People really warned me about this being a very tough climate to be a police officer, and I have not found that to be the case. I have found everybody to be very supportive and really want to do the things that are necessary to create that unique and special relationship between their police department and their community.

So I've been really pleased with what I've found in this community so far, and I've been really also very pleased with how this police department has embraced me as a new leader and wanting to kind of move us forward and take a look at the three-, five- and seven-year horizon on what we should be doing.

Question: What has shocked you the most about policing in Eugene?

Answer: The Eugene Police Department has been through some challenges in the past with regards to behavior of officers, and I think what's shocked me the most is just how much impact there has been and residual fallout from that and how quickly we kind of transport ourselves back into time and remember those moments of misconduct, and I think that's shocked me.

I felt like coming here, we were at a really, really good place, where we'd kind of moved past that and really started to build a relationship, and I think for the most part we've done that. But there have been moments where people are very, very quick to remember the misconduct of the past. ... I've always said that the cornerstone of our relationship with this community starts with hiring the right people. So we're really working hard on continuing to do that.

Now it's my job to just make sure we hire the right people, and give them some direction and hold them accountable, and make sure they are fiercely protective of the relationship that we have with the community.

Question: What have you learned, and what do you hope to learn more about?

Answer: I really have spent a lot of time trying to better understand the needs of this community around its unhoused population and those folks that need systems and services in place to be able to work towards a better place in their lives. I think that was the biggest piece of policing in Eugene that I didn't have a ton of exposure to. That has been a learning curve and one that I have kind of embraced, and really thrown myself in to.

As we move forward, what I hope to learn better is where I can have and where we can have better partnerships with other local jurisdictions. I feel like, while we work together in crisis really well and we come together as a law enforcement community in crisis really well, I'll want to continue to look forward to finding those partnership opportunities and being a better partner with my local and state and federal partners around this area.

Question: What changes are coming to the department?

Answer: We have tremendous momentum right now around recruiting and hiring. I have 13 brand new officers starting on Monday. And that basically brings us up to full staff for the first time in I don't know how long since we could say we're fully staffed. We're right there. The ones I am hiring now will backfill the ones that I select for our new street crimes unit.

We have such awesome momentum right now around hiring. I challenged this organization to compress our hiring process from six months down to 90 days, because I felt like we were losing good candidates to other agencies because we were taking too long. And they did. They stepped up, and they made it work.

The new street crimes unit — we're superexcited about this. On Sept. 26, we made a presentation to (the Eugene City) Council, and council took a really strong leadership position on helping us enhance our community safety in a variety of areas with some additional revenue in our supplemental budget that happens in December. And one of those areas was me being specifically able to add 10 police officer positions to build a street crimes team that is going to be responsive to the needs in our community in solving problems.

It's going to be problem-oriented policing. It's not going to necessarily be a team that handles 911 calls for service, but to really take a look at where the pain points are in different neighborhoods and different parts of our community and actually come up with a strategic plan on how we're going to solve them.

There's a variety of things they'll be paying attention to, from some of the livability issues we have to some of the controlled substance issues we have, and the narcotics enforcement that needs to be done on that street level.

Question: How is your family settling in to the community?

Answer: We're settling in great, in the sense that — kids are fantastic, they are enjoying school, they're doing a great job. This community has been so welcoming to our family, and we've had many opportunities to connect on a personal basis with the community.

The piece that I maybe took for granted and I didn't do a lot of homework on was the availability of housing at all levels. I by charter have to live in the city limits so that leaves a smaller footprint than most, and so it's been a challenging market. There's not a lot of inventory, and the inventory that's out there is ambitiously priced. So we're trying to be thoughtful to find something that meets family needs without stressing us too much financially.

That's been a challenge, and we're still renting right now. We enjoy where we're at, but at some point I'll want to find where home is for the family.