

# The Register-Guard

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Opinion

## **Council, pass payroll tax for public safety**

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Eugene City Council is considering a payroll tax to fund public safety improvements. The need is clear, and a payroll tax is a reasonable mechanism to raise the money. The only question is whether council members will demonstrate courage and leadership by passing the ordinance themselves or will punt it to voters.

Council last year approved a one-time funding boost of \$8.6 million for police while the city worked out a permanent plan. Eugene Police Chief Chris Skinner is spending that money well. He's hired 10 new officers, half of whom form a street crime unit engaged on some of the most visible local criminal activities such as shutting down problem houses.

That he's been able to hire anyone is bright spot. In Portland, things are so bad, they can't recruit qualified officers.

But the money runs out in 2020 and isn't enough to pay for the massive public safety improvements the community needs. Eugene is in crisis, and if the community does not respond soon, it could suffer permanent damage.

"We're only a few years from spiraling out of control," Skinner told The Register-Guard editorial board last week.

Population growth is part of the challenge. The number of residents has increased, but public safety spending has not kept up. The homelessness crisis, with its related substance use and mental health problems, further strains services and diminishes quality of life. Small crimes such as theft and car break-ins abound.

The volume of crimes has outstripped the ability of law enforcement to respond. If there's a critical situation, the police will show up, but a lot of low-level crimes that people call in go unanswered. Skinner said that officers can't

respond to about one-third of calls, and sometimes when they do respond it's hours later.

Officers also cannot engage in the sort of pro-active community policing that can have a long-term impact. Instead they rush from one emergency to the next.

Under those circumstances, people grow apathetic and despondent. Why bother reporting that a car was broken into or a propane tank stolen? Police probably won't show up, and if they do, there won't be much of an investigation.

Eugene has no drug task force, no gang enforcement team, no internet crimes against children team. And don't think that criminals fail to notice that they can act with near-impunity. How is that possible in Oregon's second-largest city?

The city has seen a rash of stabbings lately. Even if the stabber and victim already knew each other, people start to reconsider visiting a public park or a shopping center with their kids knowing that there's a chance they could witness something like that. And then there's downtown, where tents, needles and aggressive unhoused residents turn off housed residents and visitors.

The quality of life that makes Eugene special suffers under the weight of it all.

Skinner worries people will start to abandon the city for communities in which they feel more secure. Anecdotally, prospective University of Oregon students and their parents who see the tents and trash and hear about the crime are looking to other schools.

"If we don't do anything, we run the risk of driving people away from the community. People are overwhelmingly frustrated. They have a sense of hopelessness about making a difference on livability issues," Skinner said.

But it's not hopeless if taxpayers do their part.

A year ago, Eugene hired Chief Skinner because he's an engaged, hands-on leader. The community cannot ask him to police competently and not give him the resources he needs.

The payroll tax proposal came from a council-created advisory committee that spent months studying options to raise money for more police, additional jail beds, a third municipal court and homeless outreach. The committee considered more than two dozen options for raising the money and chose the payroll tax as the most broad-based and politically palatable way to raise enough money.

Some of the details are still being worked out, but the goal is to raise about \$22.8 million per year. The tax rate would be about 0.2 or 0.3 percent, which would translate into \$7 to \$10 per month for someone who earns \$20 an hour.

One hard deadline for change will be the World Championships in Athletics, which comes to town in 2021. Surely the current face of Eugene is not what residents want on televisions worldwide. When world class athletes and media visit the city, they need to be safe and free to visit all parts of the city, not just the "safe" ones.

In a representative democracy, the people elect leaders to make tough decisions. Supporting a tax increase is tough, but this tax increase is necessary. Council shouldn't send a payroll tax for public safety to voters. It should pass it itself — unanimously.