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Crime in North County below state average

Rates in Battle Ground and Ridgefield increase

RICK BANNAN
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The Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs (WASPC) released their annual Crime in Washington report in July, highlighting what offenses officers are seeing locally and across the state.

WASPC's report relied on the National Incident-Based Reporting System for its statistics, which

standardizes how departments document the offenses they see. The July report compared 2018 offenses with 2017, which statewide showed a decrease of 0.7%.

For agencies covering North County, all either saw decreases in number of offenses reported or maintained crime rates per 1,000 population below the state average of 69.5 if they experienced increases. Through the summer The Reflector spoke to heads of five agencies about the report — Clark County Sheriff's Office and the police departments of Battle Ground, Ridgefield, Woodland and La Center.

Clark County

The Clark County Sheriff's Office saw a 20.3% drop in number of offenses in 2018 compared to 2017, with 3,977 reported into the NIBRS system. Though he would like to say the drop in crime was solely due to police work of his deputies, Clark County Sheriff Chuck Atkins pointed to other factors that could decrease offenses such as annexations of more urban parts of the counties by cities or changes in response priorities based on available resources like personnel.

"I've been here well over 40 years and we have always been understaffed," Atkins said, noting funding differences between cities and counties as well as economic impacts of being a county bordering Oregon with its lack of sales tax affecting funding. He said Washington itself had the lowest rate of officers per 1,000 population of any state in the U.S.

Atkins said his office has roughly 450 employees, including 150 commissioned deputies, about 170 corrections officers and

a jail records and civil branch that make up the rest. He added the office's jurisdiction was roughly 240,000 in unincorporated Clark County.

Since he was elected sheriff in 2014, Atkins has shifted some of the priorities for deputies responding to calls to better utilize the staff they have. He said his office uses online and secure phone line reporting for crimes without clear suspects or substantial evidence, easing the burden on deputies to allow them to respond to more major incidents.

The priority shift also had fewer responses to auto accidents so long as crashes weren't blocking the road or had suspected drug impairment, Atkins said. He reasoned that could lead to lower numbers for crimes discovered during those responses, such as finding a warrant on an individual.

Outside of criminal offenses, Atkins said the department is seeing more social issues come up in their work, naming homelessness, drug and alcohol use and men-

tal health as examples. He also mentioned abandoned vehicles, specifically motorhomes, which have increasingly become an issue given the cost for disposing of the vehicles.

The sheriff's office is also trying to get a replacement for its aging jail, something that was the focus of an 18-month process for a committee formed to see what a new jail would look like. Though the committee came short of a specific recommendation, now the sheriff's office is meeting monthly with the county manager's office to discuss options.

Whatever the replacement would look like, Atkins noted the cost would be large — previous work by the jail committee put a replacement in the \$400 million range. Ultimately it would be up to Clark County Council to move forward with whatever a replacement would be.

Battle Ground

Battle Ground had the largest percentage increase in offenses

*See **CRIME** on Page A8*

NORTH COUNTY GIVES BIG



North County Community Food Bank Program Coordinator Jake Smith offers chicken skewers to community members at an open house on Sept. 19. The food bank received more money than any other nonprofit participating in the 24-hour fundraiser. **Full story on A3.**

Battle Ground council votes in raise

Health coverage also approved; mayor believes increased workload warrants raise

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The Battle Ground City Council voted to increase councilor pay starting next year for the seats up for election in November, more than doubling monthly pay for those regular council positions while also providing bumps for the mayor and deputy mayor.

The council voted 5-1 on pay increases during their Sept. 16 meeting, with councilor Steven Phelps voting against the measure. Councilor Brian Munson was absent.

The vote would set monthly compensation for regular city councilors at \$900, \$1,000 for the deputy mayor and \$1,100 for the mayor. Currently, positions that were elected in 2015 receive \$400 monthly, ones elected in 2017 receive \$600 and the mayor receives \$750.

Those positions elected in 2015 are up again this year, leading to a \$500-per-month increase for Position 3 and Position 7, currently filled by Phelps and councilor Philip Johnson, respectively.

Position 2 is also up for election, though the incumbent is deputy mayor Shane Bowman, meaning that should he be re-elected and retain his deputy mayor position next year his effective compensation would increase by \$600 monthly. He is running unopposed.

In a call with The Reflector af-



Battle Ground City Council hears testimony during a 2018 meeting.

ter the meeting, city manager Erin Erdman explained that should the council decide on a new mayor and deputy mayor next year, they would be eligible for the pay raise as their positions changed, even if they were elected in 2017. Those positions are appointed by all of the council on a biennial basis.

Increases to the approved amounts for the other council seats would go into effect following their respective elections in 2021. Mayor Mike Dalesandro mentioned that the last increase in councilor compensation was in 2017, leading to the \$600 monthly for the councilors and \$750 for the mayor.

For the positions subject to the raise other than Bowman, Phelps is not running for re-election this year, with newcomers Neil Butler and Shauna Walters vying for his seat. Johnson will face off against challenger Josh VanGelder in November.

Reasons for raise

As to why councilors felt a raise was warranted, Dalesandro believes the councilors have been

taking on more work in the past few years.

"That's not a bad thing. It's just the reality of a growing city," Dalesandro said. Bowman referenced an anonymous letter that had circulated in the community prior to council's vote, refuting one of its claims that councilors

*See **RAISE** on Page A6*

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Crime

Continued from page A1

in 2018 from 2017 at 62.7% with a total of 898. Though he disputed some of the statistics reported such as two reported murders in 2018, Battle Ground Police Chief Bob Richardson noted a few factors that could lead to increased offenses reported. More reports could be due to retail stores aggressively pursuing shoplifters or a community that has a good relationship with the police department, whereas one with a bad relationship was more likely to underreport crime.

“A lot of these are crimes of opportunity,” Richardson said. He mentioned a rash of mailbox thefts earlier in the year as well as a vehicle prowl crime spree as some examples.

Richardson pointed to his department’s clearance rate for offenses of just shy of 40%, above the statewide average of 26.6%. Richardson said that social media and better residential surveillance technology has helped with his department’s investigations.

“At the end of the day, the (crime) number doesn’t matter. We want to arrest one guy or two people and clear the cases they have been involved in, then recover the property. That’s what the whole goal is,” Richardson said.

Crime statistics were good for long-term strategic planning, Richardson said. He noted that the majority of reports were non-violent property crimes, with larceny/theft offenses and destruction of property accounting for more than half of the reports.

“In our city we don’t have street robberies with strangers robbing you,” Richardson said. In the age of online shopping, he said he’s seen more “porch pirates” stealing deliveries, something that a few years ago were a more rare occurrence.

Richardson said his department has about 21 officers when



Battle Ground Police Chief Bob Richardson talks with The Reflector about a rash of mailbox thefts earlier this year.

factoring in vacancies or ones on some kind of leave, fewer than BGPD had in 2009. To help use what the department has he said he keeps his eyes and ears open on social media to benefit his department. He mentioned in some cases he’s had officers follow up based on community members’ posts regarding their interactions with the police in order to make sure the department’s actions were in line with BGPD’s goals on serving its jurisdiction.

“We are very in tune on how the community feels, and we try to respond as best we can and try to make people as happy as we can with the limited resources we have,” Richardson said.

The biggest complaint among residents wasn’t something that would show up in the Crime in

Washington report, as Richardson said he hears the most about traffic issues from residents.

“Traffic enforcement is something that the officers do when they have time,” Richardson said, explaining that the department’s primary focus was on 911 calls than patrolling streets for traffic violations.

Ridgefield

Washington’s fastest-growing city saw the number of offenses reported go up in 2018, with 20.4% more crimes compared to 2017 for a total of 266.

“We’re getting a little busier,” Ridgefield Police Chief John Brooks said, noting that the county as a whole was growing.

Larceny/theft offences made up the bulk of crimes reported for Ridgefield, which Brooks said was likely in part due to theft of construction material on job sites for new neighborhoods or other development. He said department officers have been checking in on those construction projects as a way to prevent more theft, making sure sites were secure so they didn’t prove tempting for would-be criminals.

“One person can do a lot of damage. It’s amazing how you can arrest one person and see a 40% drop month-to-month in thefts and larcenies,” Brooks added. Though theft made up the bulk of crime, like Battle Ground Brooks said Ridgefield receives the most calls regarding traffic and parking.

Like some of the other department heads Brooks said recruitment and retention was an issue for police, mentioning it took roughly seven months for RPD to fill a vacancy. Ridgefield’s police comprises 10 officers including Brooks and a non-commissioned staff member, according to the department’s website.

The department is gearing up to make a move soon to a bigger station as part of a development at the corner of Mill Street and Main Avenue which will more than double office space for the agency.

“We’re very excited about the prospect of a new police station,”

Brooks remarked, saying RPD was slated to move in by the middle of 2020.

Woodland

Across the Lewis River, the Woodland Police Department saw a decrease in crime reported in 2018 compared to 2017 at about a 14.9% drop, with a total of 516 offenses. Though the department has the highest crime rate of the five with 83.2 per 1,000 population, it also has the highest clearance rate at 53.7%.

“In any crime investigation, very seldom do we come across one that we can’t solve,” Woodland Police Chief Jim Kelly said, adding that for this year he reinstated the department’s detective division given a full roster of 10 sworn officers.

Regarding the elevated crime rate compared to other nearby jurisdictions, Kelly reasoned that the city’s location just off of Interstate 5 resulted in more of what he called “transient crime” where individuals stopping into town would commit a crime before leaving.

“They may be northbound or southbound on the highway before we even get notified that a crime has been committed,” Kelly said.

Though now the department was full-staffed the last increase to the department’s size was in 2007 when the city had a population around 5,100. The latest population estimate from the state Office of Financial Management had the city’s population at 6,315 this year.

Increasing staffing past the expansion made in 2007 has been a concern of the department and city for years, with a ballot measure that would increase property taxes to hire three additional staff up for a vote in November. As of estimates at the time of Woodland City Council’s approval of the vote in July it would cost property owners 63 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value.

Kelly said part of that staff increase would be an administrative sergeant position which would free up officers for more patrolling and response. Ideally

he would like to have a dedicated school resource officer next year if the vote is approved.

“That’s probably the most important thing for me as an administrator, is making sure that our officers are able to respond, and we have enough officers to respond,” Kelly said.

La Center

Though La Center had the greatest decrease in crimes reported in 2018 compared to 2017 based on WASPC’s numbers, police chief Marc Denney said that probably wasn’t the reality. The data in the Crime in Washington report logged only 50 offenses in 2018 compared to the 94 in the previous year.

“We’re pretty much where we were at in 2017,” Denney said. He said recently the department has had a change in its records reporting which led to the discrepancy, adding they would be working to rectify the issue in the future.

The department is also the smallest of the jurisdictions, comprising nine sworn officers including Denney. By population, La Center is the smallest of the five jurisdictions and also had the fewest offenses and a crime rate lower than the other cities even when adjusted for the reporting discrepancy. Denney said the low amount of crime was likely due to the city being a bedroom community to bigger municipalities, with most of the draw from outside being the cardrooms which have been doing worse in recent years economically.

“I think things are changing as time goes on,” Denney said, pointing to growth at the I-5 junction and the potential for multi-family housing as leading to a shift. To meet those changes without the expansion of resources he said the department would need more of the community’s help down the line in order to keep La Center as safe as it has been historically.

“We’re not probably going to see the growth as far as personnel ... I think we’re flatlining where we are at based upon our budget,” Denney said. “We’re going to need more and more of the community’s help moving forward in identifying areas that are problems and working with them in coming up with solutions.”

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To The Editor,

We look forward to The Reflector each week.

The quality of reporting is solid. We may not agree with all the editorials or letters to the editor, but you do know the difference between fact and opinion.

Thanks!

Judy Z
Battle Ground, WA