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CASCADIA DAILY NEWS

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RESUMPTION OF 72-HOUR PARKING RULE HITS HOME TO HOMELESS

No easy fixes to city's car theft problem

By RALPH SCHWARTZ
Staff Reporter

The security camera footage isn't especially dramatic, except maybe for the owner of the white Ford F-350 pickup visible on the left side of the frame.

The camera recorded what was described on the social media site NextDoor as a crime in progress: Just after 9 a.m. on Jan. 20 in downtown Bellingham, someone wearing a hoodie and a backpack approaches the driver's door. Less than 30 seconds later, they are in the truck. Less than 20 seconds after that, a plume of white smoke bursts out of the tailpipe. Seconds later, the truck is gone.

January 2022 is a recent high-water mark for stolen cars in Bellingham. Police report 74 auto thefts that month on a crime statistics webpage, the most in any month in at least the past four years. In 2019, Bellingham averaged 13 car thefts per month. So far this year, Bellingham police have recorded on average 68 vehicle thefts per month.

Stolen vehicles have been a growing problem over the past year across Whatcom and Skagit counties, too. Most of the U.S. has seen a spike in vehicle thefts since the pandemic started.

See > THEFT, A7



Ed Hunt stands outside his RV on Cornwall Avenue on March 16. Hunt has lived along the road for more than a year. (Hailey Hoffman/Cascadia Daily News)

By KAI UYEHARA
Staff Reporter

Ed Hunt's inoperable recreational vehicle is parked alongside Cornwall Avenue

near the Bellingham Shipping Terminal. A few of his belongings sit outside the rig, such as his cooking grill and a collection of his friend's possessions beside

the door. Hunt, who is living in the RV after losing his farm, said he has parked in the same spot for about two months because his de fac-

to home doesn't run. As he spoke with Cascadia Daily News outside his banged-up rig, Hunt unboxed a part needed to fix the vehicle.

Hunt's vehicle is one of

several parked on Cornwall, and one of many parked around Bellingham serving as living quarters.

See > HOME, A8

Community weighs in on Bellingham police chief semifinalists

By RALPH SCHWARTZ
Staff Reporter

Candidates for Bellingham police chief aren't just trying to impress their potential future boss, Mayor Seth Fleetwood. City Hall gave the entire community an opportunity to pass judgment on the three semifinalists during an online forum March 17.

Survey respondents scrutinized the candidates closely, assessing what they wore, whether they made eye contact over Zoom, and most importantly, whether they have what it takes to be the city's police chief in a particularly challenging time for law enforcement.

Former Bellingham Chief David Doll retired less than a year after police killings of unarmed Black people

sparked nationwide protests calling for major police reforms. On top of that, over the past year, Bellingham's property crime rate has risen dramatically.

Community members have been clear about what they want from the next police chief: accountability, trustworthiness, a strong sense of racial equity and the know-how to address rising crime.

People who watched the March 17 forum won't have the final say on who Bellingham's next police chief will be, but 59 survey responses indicated that one candidate rose to the top in their view: Everett Deputy Chief John DeRousse. More than two-thirds of the respondents said he was "strong" in the areas of public safety, trust-building, racial equity

and accountability.

The other two candidates, Lt. Rebecca Mertzig of the Snohomish County Sheriff's Office and Commander Dennis Flynn of Commerce City, Colorado were generally perceived as "adequate" in these areas.

"I thought Mr. DeRousse was the most impressive of the three candidates," one favorable public review of the Everett officer said. "He is able to acknowledge the reality of racism, underlying causes of homelessness and appears to have the capacity to find creative solutions."

DeRousse scored points for preparation. "He also did his homework to learn about local service providers," one respondent said, as DeRousse demonstrated by mentioning Belling-

ham and Whatcom County's GRACE program, or Ground-level Response And Coordinated Engagement, and expressing his desire to partner with Northwest Youth Services.

Some who responded to the survey appreciated Flynn's big-city experience with the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department before moving to Colorado. Flynn said he was initially nervous when the Las Vegas department established a citizen review board in the 1990s, but now says he sees the value of public oversight of police agencies. Flynn said he would look into establishing a similar review board in Bellingham and invite Black Lives Matter and other groups to participate.

"I believe Dennis would

be tough on crime while holding officers accountable," one comment said. Several survey responses expressed concern about Flynn's stated intention to retire in eight years.

Mertzig, who lives in Whatcom County, had the inside track for some respondents as the only female candidate. Some considered her 18 years of law enforcement experience, compared to DeRousse's 27 or Flynn's 33 years, to be a drawback — but not everyone.

"Local candidate, young and female," a survey respondent said. "No-brainer."

In her discussion of racial bias, Mertzig said she has experienced "microaggressions" as a woman in law enforcement.

"I'm a female in a very male-dominated progression," Metzger said. "That's why these issues are very important to me."

Her statement resonated with some survey respondents.

"Mertzig's ... mention of examining her own perspective felt more sincere and more likely for PD improvement," a commenter said. "She is familiar w/ Bham and can build on that. Hire local."

In an email on Monday, Fleetwood's office said the mayor expects to hold additional interviews with police chief finalists in early April. After extensive background checks on the finalists, Fleetwood anticipates making an offer to the city's preferred candidate in May.

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THEFT > FROM A1

Why now?

Bellingham Police Lt. Claudia Murphy said “very few” auto theft cases result in arrests. Of the 171 filed so far this year, Bellingham police have arrested 13 suspects.

For now, police say they can’t do much about the rising crime wave. Murphy said they’re not even sure why it’s happening.

Whatcom County’s elected prosecutor said he feels the community’s pain.

“It’s a concern for everyone in our community. Everyone is talking about it,” Prosecutor Eric Richey said. “Everyone is talking about not feeling safe the way they used to in our city. That’s impactful to hear as the county prosecutor. We want this to be a good place to live.”

The reasons for the sudden rise in auto thefts may be unclear, but Murphy mentioned some contributing factors. High on her list was a state law established last year that limits law enforcement’s ability to pursue suspects in vehicles.

“The criminals know at this point in time that we can’t necessarily chase them,” Murphy said. “If they run from us in a stolen vehicle, that isn’t a pursuable offense.”

Bellingham’s stolen-vehicle numbers were already going up in 2020. Total cases more than doubled during that first year of COVID-19 lockdowns compared to 2019.

In the first months of the pandemic, police officials told the Associated Press vehicle thefts provided a low-risk, high-reward opportunity for criminals because people were using their cars less and leaving them unattended more. Desperation brought on by high unemployment at the time also motivated the 2020 spike in auto thefts, according to the AP.

As Murphy said, “Some folks are in dire straits and need to steal to make money.” But the one thing that might define Bellingham’s car thieves the most is the crime itself.

“Many people who are stealing cars are lifelong criminals,” Murphy said. “All they’ve done is stealing cars.”

How to be a car thief

Thieves have about as many ways to steal cars as there are types of cars on the market. Ford trucks, like the one in the downtown Bellingham security footage, are notoriously easy to steal, law enforce-

“IF OUR CAR THIEVES USED THEIR INGENUITY, THEIR DETERMINATION AND THEIR PERSEVERANCE FOR POSITIVE, THERE WOULD BE SUCH A POSITIVE EFFECT ON THE COMMUNITY.”

— LT. CLAUDIA MURPHY, BPD

ment officials say.

On Feb. 3, a Sedro-Woolley officer knocked on the window of a Ford truck parked at an auto parts store with the engine running and the driver’s side lock punched out. The occupant was so startled, he tried to back out of his parking spot without realizing the officer had parked his black-and-white SUV directly behind him. The driver damaged the police cruiser, two other parked vehicles, and the side of the store building in a mad dash to escape, according to a Sedro-Woolley police report.

Criminals also target 1990s Hondas and Toyotas because they’re easy to take. “Anything that no longer has a (radio transponder) chip is easier to steal and break into,” Murphy said, although thieves also know how to bypass the chip keys.

In short, the ability to steal a car is limited only by how much patience and

mechanical creativity a person has.

“If our car thieves used their ingenuity, their determination and their perseverance for positive, there would be such a positive effect on the community,” Murphy said.

No justice

Police and the prosecutor both said many of the usual deterrents for preventing auto thefts have broken down. For one, strict limits on the jail population imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic meant that some suspects arrested for property crimes weren’t held. Sheriff Bill Elfo confirmed this in a presentation he gave on Jan. 20 to the county Justice Project’s Stakeholder Advisory Committee.

Booking restrictions may have been relaxed since then. In an email to Cascadia Daily News on March 18, the Sheriff’s Office provided a list of offenses that

will keep a suspect held in jail until their bail hearing, including several property crimes. Burglary and possession of stolen property were on the list, as were motor vehicle theft and possession.

Setting aside jail restrictions, the entire justice system in the county has barely been functioning the past two years. COVID-19 lockdowns closed Whatcom County Superior Court for most of that period.

“People have not been held accountable in the ways they did prior to COVID, and a lot of that has to do with booking restrictions and the inability to have trials,” Richey said.

The court has started to work its way through a backlog of cases since reopening on Feb. 14, but auto thefts aren’t a top priority, Richey said.

“Our attorneys are overloaded with work, and we are focusing on the more serious crimes,” Richey said — particularly sex crimes.

“We want to get through a bunch of those cases,” he said on March 16. That’s been our focus the past month.”

On its end, the Bellingham Police Department is hampered in its investigations because it elimi-

nated all special units due to a staffing shortage. Car theft cases might have been handled — or prevented altogether — by the department’s now-defunct special investigations and anti-crime units. Murphy said Bellingham’s detectives do what they can to process a recovered vehicle for fingerprints or other DNA evidence.

Most stolen cars are recovered. Over a 90-day period ending March 14, only 37 out of 185 stolen vehicles hadn’t been found, Murphy said.

Bellingham police are taking one step at least to deter the crime, Murphy said: The department is now actively publicizing the surge in auto thefts, hoping to convince residents to take steps to reduce their own risk.

Murphy offered a few tips for vehicle owners:

- Park in lighted areas.
- Install cameras and post signs saying cameras are in use (although cameras on wireless connections are easy to disable).
- Use an anti-theft device.
- Store those high-risk Ford trucks and older Hondas or Toyotas in a garage.

LAW & JUSTICE

\$4M settlement deal reached in police death of Manuel Ellis

By ASSOCIATED PRESS
CDN wire services

TACOMA — The family of Manuel Ellis, a Black man killed by police two years ago as he pleaded for breath, has reached a \$4 million proposed settlement with one of the two government agencies it named in a wrongful death lawsuit.

The Pierce County Council was scheduled to vote Tuesday on whether to approve the settlement, The News Tribune reported.

“We are happy to have

reached this agreement with the County,” the family’s attorney, Matthew A. Ericksen Sr., said in an email. “By reaching this resolution Pierce County has established a foundation upon which the Ellis family and the community can begin the process of moving forward.”

Ellis’ sister, Monet Carter-Mixon, and mother, Marcia Carter, continue to pursue their federal civil rights and wrongful death lawsuit against the city of Tacoma and against several individual officers, some of

whom have been charged criminally.

Ellis, 33, died March 3, 2020, just weeks before George Floyd’s death triggered a nationwide reckoning on race and policing. Police stopped him while he was walking home from a convenience store with a box of doughnuts and a bottle of water.

Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson charged Tacoma police officers Christopher Burbank and Matthew Collins, who are white, with second-degree murder after witnesses

reported that they attacked Ellis without provocation.

Officer Timothy Rankine, who is Asian, faces a charge of first-degree manslaughter. He is accused of kneeling on Ellis’ back and shoulder as Ellis repeatedly told them he couldn’t breathe, according to a probable cause statement filed in Pierce County Superior Court.

The officers have pleaded not guilty.

Two Pierce County Sheriff deputies also responded to the scene, including Deputy Gary Sanders, who

grabbed Ellis’ leg and assisted in restraining him while Tacoma police handcuffed and hogtied him. The family’s lawsuit faulted the deputies for not helping Ellis despite his distress.

Burbank and Collins reported that the encounter happened after they saw Ellis trying to get into occupied cars at a stoplight; they said Ellis punched the window of their cruiser and attacked them as they got out, according to statements from other officers cited in the charging documents.

The Pierce County med-

ical examiner called Ellis’ death a homicide because of a lack of oxygen caused by restraint, with an enlarged heart and methamphetamine intoxication as contributing factors.

The death made Ellis’ name synonymous with pleas for justice at protests in the Pacific Northwest. His final words — “I can’t breathe, sir!” — were captured by a home security camera, as was the retort from one of the officers: “Shut the (expletive) up, man.”

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