



NEWS

## Eugene 'gained some ground,' 'made some impressions' with enhanced downtown enforcement



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**Eugene Police Department ramps up its presence downtown 'in the wake of increasing con'**

The Eugene Police Department ramped up its presence in the city's downtown core for a month starting at the end of January.

**Louis Krauss and Megan Banta** Register-Guard

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For John Codner and other people living on streets in Eugene's downtown, it's been a challenge to find a place to sleep at night the past several months.

Codner said he's been ticketed or forced to move at least twice and that officers have been quick to ticket people.

"It's like, 'You're sitting on a planter? You're getting a ticket,' 'Sitting on the ground outside here? You're getting a ticket,'" Codner said Feb. 16 next to the alley off West Broadway next to Spectrum, a queer event space, bar and restaurant.

He's noticed a significant drop in the number of people he knows hanging out downtown. He and others experiencing homelessness have felt

targeted as part of increased police presence and enforcement downtown.

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The Eugene Police Department ramped up its presence in the city's downtown core for a month starting at the end of January, drawing mixed reactions as people disagreed whether it was beneficial or a waste of time that unfairly affected unhoused people.



Eugene Police Community Engagement Team Specialist Janina Rager, left, and Crime Prevention Program Manager Jeff Blonde walk through downtown Eugene in March during a routine outreach tour. *Chris Pietsch/The Register-Guard*

The enforcement effort came “in the wake of increasing concerns and calls” by people living and visiting downtown and businesses, according to a news release the department sent out a week after the increased patrols began.

Typically, officers from EPD’s Downtown Team focus on the “Downtown Activity Zone” bounded by Lincoln and High streets and Sixth and 11th avenues.

At the end of January, the downtown team paired with the department’s Street Crimes Unit, which focuses on addressing prolific offenders, for

enhanced enforcement downtown. Patrol officers on overtime also patrolled downtown during this time.

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After two weeks of enhanced enforcement, the department's [Community Engagement Team](#) also upped its patrols downtown.

Eugene Police Chief Chris Skinner told The Register-Guard the decision to saturate downtown wasn't just about crime data but also factored in anecdotal accounts of incidents that people said made them feel unsafe as well as feedback from Councilor Emily Semple, who represents a sizable part of downtown.

“*There's crime and safety statistically validated, and then there's the perception of safety, The perception of safety is different for everyone on what makes them feel safe and what doesn't.*”

EUGENE POLICE CHIEF CHRIS SKINNER

“There's crime and safety statistically validated, and then there's the perception of safety,” Skinner said. “The perception of safety is different for everyone on what makes them feel safe and what doesn't.”

While Skinner said calls for an increased presence weren't about just one group of people, business owners repeatedly referenced the unhoused when talking to The Register-Guard.

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Abdul Wahed, who owns a food cart that was recently vandalized, said he thinks having more officers downtown has made the area feel more welcoming to families.

“With customers with families, before they didn’t trust having kids coming and sitting here and enjoying the weather or food,” said Wahed, standing outside his Afghani Cuisine and German Sausage food cart March 8. “Now it feels safer for me and for everybody.”

Officials said police presence doesn’t address the underlying issues but did help. Even Semple, who typically wouldn’t be thrilled about more patrols, said it was the only choice and seems to have worked.

“I do think we gained some ground,” said Semple, who has spent much of her five years on council focused on downtown issues. “I do think we made some impressions.”

Downtown still isn’t a comfortable place, she said, and the city needs to work to activate the area in positive ways to make people feel safer being downtown.

“I think that’s the bigger problem right now is not the direct safety of downtown, but the perception of safety,” Semple said.

That creates a cycle, she said, because people don’t go downtown if they don’t feel safe, but it would feel safer with more people there.

### **Councilor said downtown ‘not a pleasant place’ during meeting**



Eugene Crime Prevention Program Manager Jeff Blonde, left, Eugene Police Community Engagement Team Specialist Janina Rager and Sgt. Gregg Magnus watch from an alley in downtown Eugene while officers handle a disorderly subject call from a business. *The Register-Guard*

Councilors were discussing downtown as part of a presentation on the riverfront festival the city will run in July during the World Athletics Championships when Semple made a comment that Skinner said caught his attention.

“Downtown is not a pleasant place, it is not a comfortable place, and I am the last person who wants to be saying that,” Semple said during that work session on Jan. 10.

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She also said crime had been increasing.

Skinner looked and saw there had been a concerning increase in one crime in particular — aggravated assaults. He’d also noticed growing issues with fights outside bars late at night and stories about people, particularly women, feeling unsafe as they walked to their car, he said.

Downtown is one of the best-resourced areas in the city, Skinner said, with multiple teams focused on public safety, including:

- **Downtown Team:** Officers who are assigned to the downtown core of Eugene. It currently has four officers, an acting lieutenant, an acting sergeant, a Community Safety Officer station program manager and two assigned Community Safety Officers.
- **Community Engagement Team:** Specialists and program managers walk and drive through areas, make daily contact with people and businesses downtown and take steps to prevent crimes and assist police. The team has three specialists and two program managers, all part of Eugene Police Department.
- **Downtown Ambassadors:** The City of Eugene’s blue uniform-wearing ambassadors walk through the city and act as a combination of “visitor guide, social worker, behavior monitor, custodian, patient listener, and gentle rules enforcer,” according to the city website. They are not police but will call EPD when they see a crime being committed or CAHOOTS if someone has a mental health or substance crisis.

The police department supplemented those efforts with overtime hours from Street Crimes Unit and patrol officers.

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While the release announcing the enforcement cited an increase in calls for service downtown, a Register-Guard analysis of the dispatch log and calls for service, provided via a public records request, didn't show an overall increase.

But that quantitative data doesn't show everything, Skinner said, and the qualitative data matters, too.

"The stories are really important to hear from people," he said. "And that's, that's the piece that sometimes doesn't make it on the call log."

Sgt. Gregg Magnus, who has headed the Downtown Team for about four years and is serving as an acting lieutenant in operations, said there wasn't a jump in calls but there was an increase in public concern.

EPD started getting a lot of calls from residents and businesses wanting to see more police presence, he said, as they stopped feeling comfortable because there haven't been a lot of people downtown.

Janina Rager, a community engagement specialist, said that team also has gotten a lot of calls from businesses with safety concerns.



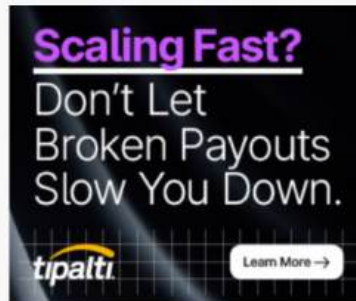
Eugene Police Community Engagement Team Specialist Janina Rager, right, hugs hairstylist Kristi Hazel during a tour to check in with local business people in the downtown Eugene core. *The Register-Guard*

Rager and her teammates focus on crime prevention, which includes conducting business and home safety assessments and teaching seminars on de-escalation and personal safety.



“There’s a lot of businesses that will say, ‘Can I call you in the morning because my employees don’t feel safe opening the business,’ ” Rager said.

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Businesses and city crews also have to clean and deal with feces, urination and drug paraphernalia left on doorsteps, she said. People breaking windows, damaging food carts and other "criminal mischief" are some other common problems reported to her, Rager said, along with graffiti.

### **'Customers don't feel safe'**

Yet while Skinner and Magnus talked about hearing from several downtown employees about safety concerns, business owners had varying reactions to the increased police presence.

Some reported a noticeable decrease in large crowds gathering outside their doors and appreciated the effort. Others saw it as a show of force and questioned if it was an effective way to support the community.

Volunteers for the Jazz Station music venue on the corner of Olive Street and West Broadway said they have had a "marked" decrease in problems with people sitting in their entrance way since police increased its presence.

"We're appreciative Chief Skinner put additional resources down here, because it has shown," said Eve McClure, the nonprofit's volunteer business manager.

**“It's a business-commercial zone, and customers don't feel safe. If they have alternative places to go, it makes sense that that's where they would go.”**

**TOM TRACEY, OWNER OF HORSEHEAD BAR ON WEST BROADWAY**

Some of the problems for the Jazz Station included people camping and setting fires in front of the business and the business having to clean garbage out of its vestibule, McClure said, adding that patrons and volunteer staff “were definitely hesitant about coming in.”

Tom Tracey, who owns the Horsehead Bar located kitty-corner to the Jazz Station, said his staff have called police occasionally over the years to deal with loitering, fighting and threatening behavior, but mostly try to stay separated from it.

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In the past couple of months, there has been “a lot less” fighting and other problems outside his bar, he said Feb. 16. Fights by bar-goers late at night have also been one of the main sources of criminal activity police have had to respond to, Skinner said.

While Tracey has seen fewer issues, he doesn't believe police enforcement can solve the overall problem and opposes officers ticketing, putting people in jail and filling the court system with low-level offenses instead of offering help.

The fighting and aggressive behavior do take a toll on business, he said.

“It's a business-commercial zone, and customers don't feel safe,” Tracey said. “If they have alternative places to go, it makes sense that that's where they would go.”

In the past, increased police presence has felt like checking a box, Tracey said, with things reverting to how they were soon after enforcement goes back to normal.

At Books With Pictures Eugene just down the street, floor manager Finlay Loudon said there was a noticeable uptick in police cars driving by the store throughout February.

“I see cop cars, literally every five or 10 minutes sometimes. ... Lately, they've just been circling the block,” Loudon, who uses they/them pronouns, said. “We've had much fewer incidents of people sitting on the corner over here screaming, which is very popular to do with some people.”

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Louden has worked at Books With Pictures for two years and said there have been around four times the store has called the Downtown Ambassadors for aid in that time. Usually, it's because someone is sleeping in front of the store, they said, or "they have been screaming for a very long time and they just need help."

One time staff called police because of a violent altercation, but Loudén thinks it's not necessary to call the police for someone who just needs someone to talk to them and help them out with their problems.

"Nine times out of 10, when someone's walking around screaming, they're just having a bad time," they said. "They're not violent, they're not doing anything to anyone."

Louden questioned whether the added police presence is an effective way to support the community downtown "because their job is to respond to things, not to prevent things, like how social programs prevent things."

Rager, with the Community Engagement Team, and a program manager regularly patrol downtown, checking in with businesses to see if they are having any problems and talking to unhoused people, sometimes about their progress finding a more stable living situation.

“Nine times out of 10, when someone’s walking around screaming, they’re just having a bad time. They’re not violent, they’re not doing anything to anyone.”

FINLAY LOUDEN, FLOOR MANAGER AT BOOKS WITH PICTURES EUGENE ON WEST BROADWAY

During one of Rager's patrols on March 8, several businesses she checked in with said they appreciated the added enforcement. She said the overall feedback from businesses has been positive.

"For me, it's very important to build not just a professional relationship, but I like the business owners out here to feel like I'm a friend to them," she said. "I've actually gotten a really good response."

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## Making it 'harder for homeless people to even come out of it'

Unhoused people said during February's increased enforcement, it felt like officers were quicker to ticket people for minor citations for things like

trespassing by sleeping next to a business.

In mid-February, Codner was sleeping under the overhang at Spectrum bar on West Broadway to get out of the rain. He said an officer came by in the morning and gave him a ticket for trespassing — a situation he said normally would have resulted in a warning.

“He could’ve asked me to leave, but instead decided to run me a ticket, and drops it on the ground instead of handing it to me like a normal person,” he said.

Others interviewed at the area of Broadway between Charnelton and Olive streets said it feels like police are unfairly profiling the homeless community.

Codner said he wishes the city and police would “be humane, realize there’s a huge homeless problem and not treat people like animals.”

Erin Woodward, a 20-year-old who has dealt with homelessness for several years, said she thinks the police missed arresting the more serious violent offenders and instead focused on lower-level violations.

Woodward isn’t a stranger to feeling singled out — she said it often feels like people who visit downtown treat her poorly and people with housing are looking down on her.

“Eugene is this hotspot for people who are homeless getting help, and so the fact that they’re trying to stop the ability for homeless people to be in this area, it literally seems like they’re trying to make it harder for homeless people to even come out of it.”

ERIN WOODWARD, 20

While business owners say visitors feel unsafe and uncomfortable, she thinks they more often show disdain for the unhoused.

Woodward said the added police presence made unhoused people feel unwelcome downtown. She’s been couch surfing recently but said many of her friends living downtown don’t know where else to go.

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She also noted she thinks it made it harder for people to exit

homelessness with officers citing them situations that show on their record

homelessness, with officers giving them citations that show on their record during housing and job applications.

“Eugene is this hotspot for people who are homeless getting help, and so the fact that they’re trying to stop the ability for homeless people to be in this area, it literally seems like they’re trying to make it harder for homeless people to even come out of it,” Woodward said.

An unhoused woman who goes by the name “Mama Jude” said she thinks it’s about a 40-60 split between housed people who look down on the unhoused and those who want to help them. Jude, 49, agreed with Woodward’s opinion that officers were targeting their community during the increased citations.

Jude said while she does think there are people living on the streets who are more troublesome with others, there are others who should be left alone. On one occasion, an officer ticketed a young man for throwing a cigarette out of a window and another for not having their dog on a leash for a brief period, Jude said.

“I’m not going to say some kids aren’t asking for it, because some are pushing it,” said Jude. “But the cops are targeting everyone (unhoused), it doesn’t matter if you’re a bad kid.”

### **Chief: Focused on behavior, seeking compliance**

Skinner said the enforcement wasn’t targeted at any group but rather at setting a different tone and communicating “a different expectation around behavior.”

Because the downtown has so many options for retail, entertainment, culture, art and other things that draw people, there are going to be a variety of people who could draw EPD’s attention for different reasons, he said.

“And so, what we’re trying to do is say, ‘Hey, awesome that you’re here. Let’s make sure we’re doing things that don’t get our attention, whatever that means for you,’ ” Skinner said.

He added the department was trying to head off what’s typically a spring and summer increase in concerning conduct before bad behaviors “attract other bad behavior in that downtown core.”

Once that happens, he said, it’s “counterproductive to the type of people and the type of behaviors we’re trying to attract downtown.”

Skinner said the goal wasn’t just to be “the hammer” but to look for the “right kind of criminal justice outcome” if officers issued a citation or made an arrest. Community court is one of those right kind of outcomes because it has “a proven ability to bring services to individuals and reduce recidivism.”

That was the department’s focus in upping officers’ presence on the streets, he said — to “make sure that crime goes down and that the behavior improves.”

### **Department ‘realistic about what we think we can change’**

City and police officials think the increased enforcement helped improve behaviors for some and get others into community court to start the process



People and businesses have said the situation downtown is better, Semple said.

Skinner knows not everyone will agree that the effort was a success but said he's trying to meet the community's needs and then listen to see whether the department carried out its goal.

"And for some people we absolutely threaded the needle," he said. "And maybe for some others, they felt like it was a waste of time, energy and effort."

Skinner added he knows the ramped-up effort isn't a permanent solution.

"We're certainly realistic about what we think we can change," he said. "I think we saw a lot of people that were engaged in bad behavior choosing to leave downtown because they didn't like the scrutiny. ... We don't anticipate that they'll be gone forever."


He said it is a tool, though one he uses when there's a spike in concerns in other areas or related to certain crimes. It's one he'd be willing to use again.

"Through this initiative, we've declared openly how important our downtown is to us from a safety perspective," he said. "And that we're willing to ramp up resources when we need to reinforce that or remind people how important it is."

Skinner stressed the department's primary goal, including downtown, is not to press charges but rather to first try to make connections, have a conversation and resolve things.

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## Downtown officers 'know exactly who is suffering and struggling'

Officers assigned to the Downtown Team do patrols on foot and bike more often than in a car because part of their job is to be visible and serve as a deterrent, Skinner said.

While it's not realistic for officers to never make an arrest downtown, their mindset should be one of a downtown ambassador or guardian "as opposed to just marching around downtown, looking for somebody to take to jail," Skinner said, adding he wants arrests to be the outlier.

Safety is the highest priority, Magnus said, but a lot of the complaints are about livability — people calling about trespassing, substance use and

similar issues.

Officers take enforcement action when there's a public safety issue like violent behavior, he said, but generally try to have a quick conversation with someone to get compliance with a rule.

They try to have a relationship with businesses, residents and neighbors, Magnus said. They also know many of the people living on the streets and can often tell when they might not be in the best headspace.

"The downtown officers would tell you they know exactly who is suffering and struggling and in the grips of either addiction or suffering from mental illness," Skinner said. "It's heartbreaking for them because there's very rarely enough services and systems in place ... to help get those people either stabilized or on a better path to wellness."

People ask for CAHOOTS — a crisis intervention team that's part of White Bird Clinic — all the time, Magnus said, but they're often tied up on another call.

Officers tried to get CAHOOTS to come to a call at Travel Lane County during a walkalong with The Register-Guard, but they weren't available.

The visitor center asked a downtown security officer to get police, and staff told officers a woman was screaming and throwing items around.



Officer Andrew Whipple, who's part of the Downtown Team, interacts with a woman who was allegedly creating a disturbance at a business in downtown Eugene. *The Register-Guard*

When the officers arrived, she was outside yelling that she wanted a cigarette and a cab to Portland because she didn't want to go to the hospital in Eugene, and visitor center staff had locked the door.

A lot of calls are similar in nature, Magnus said.

"It's like Groundhog Day, we just keep responding to the same things over

It's like Groundhog Day, we just keep responding to the same things over and over and over again," Skinner said. "And it's just not a good cycle to be in."

### **Councilor: We need more people downtown**

Semple stands by her opinion that downtown isn't safe but adds a caveat: It isn't dangerous, either.

"You don't need to not go down there. You don't need to bring a gun or a guard," she said. "And I think now we've improved things."

The city still needs long-term solutions, though, officials said.

That might include another short-term increase in police presence, Skinner said, though he'd rather add and use alternatives to enforcement.

“We're trying to get police out of that space where they're the answer for everything.”

EUGENE POLICE CHIEF CHRIS SKINNER

Police presence doesn't address the underlying causes of hardship for some of the unhoused people whose behavior might lead to a call, Skinner said, and the department shouldn't be tasked with fixing those failures in the system.

"We certainly are tired of being the catch basin for all of society's issues that they haven't been able to solve and all the systems that have failed these people throughout the years," he said about law enforcement agencies. "We're trying to get police out of that space where they're the answer for everything."

Those alternatives are useful to the downtown team, Magnus said. During the walkalong, he spoke specifically about the Downtown Ambassadors and the Community Engagement Team.

The latter team is linked with EPD but, like community service officers, isn't armed. They serve as a sort of eyes and ears, Magnus said, and can handle situations that don't need a patrol response.

Semple also is looking for ideas that can enhance public safety and the perception of safety downtown without coming down on people.

She's been pushing for a community center because everybody needs social interaction and "to feel like they belong."

There needs to be a balance, she said, but the city is doing what it can with the tools it has right now.

"I think that with our resources and reality, we're doing what we can do," Semple said. "And if more people would come downtown, they would help."

*Louis Krauss covers breaking news for The Register-Guard. Contact him at [lkrauss@registerguard.com](mailto:lkrauss@registerguard.com), and follow him on Twitter @LouisKraussNews. Contact city government watchdog Megan Banta at [mbanta@registerguard.com](mailto:mbanta@registerguard.com). Follow her on Twitter @MeganBanta\_1.*





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