

## Portland Police Chief Mike Reese sounds alarm on downtown homelessness, introduces 'Prosper Portland' initiative

skateboardattack.JPG

A criminalist with the Portland Police Bureau photographs the area around the Portland Outdoor Store where an employee was assaulted with a skateboard last July. *(Stuart Tomlinson/The Oregonian)*

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With Portland's declining crime rate and a historic low in homicides, **Police Chief Mike Reese** sounded an alarm on another front Tuesday, calling for a different approach to handling **homeless people** who sleep downtown.

The chief and his command staff have dubbed the initiative "Prosper Portland" and asked city and county officials, community leaders, social service providers and businesses to work with them to figure out a better way to solve **the problem** that's occupying his officers.

Dozens of homeless people on any given night bed down on city sidewalks, under bridges and in alcoves of businesses.

"The job of officers in our downtown neighborhoods is to wake people up," Reese said. "We know if we don't wake them up and ask them to go to Portland Rescue Mission or seek other services, that when a business owner pulls up there's a potential for conflict."

The chief brought his message to public safety leaders at the monthly Local Public Safety Coordinating Council meeting. His plea follows the decision by Portland Mayor Charlie Hales not to ask state lawmakers this year for more latitude to crack down on panhandlers or homeless people who congregate on sidewalks.

Last summer, complaints about homeless campers reached a breaking point with people fearful of walking on sidewalks in the downtown's core, said Assistant Chief Larry O'Dea.

He also pointed to the high-profile skateboard attack in July against a 70-year-old employee of the downtown Outdoor Store, who was struck in the head after he had asked some street youths to move from the sidewalk in front so he could hose it down.

"I'm concerned we're going to have a repeat of that this year if we don't do something different," Reese said.

Jason Renaud, a volunteer with the Mental Health Association of Portland, said he's skeptical of the initiative. "This is just a continued harassment of homeless people," he said. It's unfair for police to highlight one skateboard attack against a downtown employee as representative of what's happening downtown, he said.

Portland's on-again, off-again attempts to enforce sidewalk rules have been in flux since 2009, when a judge found that the city's so-called "sit-lie" ordinance was unconstitutional. Before the ruling, Portland cops could ticket people sitting and sleeping on sidewalks.

Reese reiterated some ideas that have come up before: overtime to allow more officers on walking beats, a "fair and consistent" sit-lie ordinance that cops can use with few legal hassles, as well as more treatment, housing and job opportunities to help homeless people once they're roused.



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Portland Police Chief Mike Reese introduces his idea for "Prosper Portland," a new initiative to work with homeless people in downtown Portland.

Maxine Bernstein/The Oregonian

"Prosper Portland is to ensure prosperity for everybody – the homeless as well," Reese said.

He decried the city's current rules, which he said allow aggressive panhandling and disruption of city sidewalks. Officers end up arresting people on menacing and other offenses, he said.

"The reality is then we start criminalizing low-level behavior," Reese said.

Multnomah County District Attorney Rod Underhill endorsed having officers work with social service providers and others on early intervention and prevention.

Public safety officials shouldn't "sweep up" people who don't need to be in the criminal justice system and who crowd jails and cause an unintended

increase in indigent and court expenses, said Underhill, who was at the meeting.

The mayor is considering hiring a private vendor to help police and the transportation and water bureaus clean up sidewalks and areas where homeless people sleep, the chief said.

Reese has asked Transition Projects if officers can take someone cited to appear in community court immediately to the agency's site at Bud Clark Commons to get treatment or other services.

The Police Bureau also is partnering with a city-based software and information management company, Thetus Corp., to better analyze services available and what's lacking, he said.

Danielle Forsyth of Thetus said her company is volunteering its time. "This is my home. Prosper Portland is dear to me," said Forsyth, who lives in the Pearl District.

Reese suggested that paying for the initiative could come from the state's justice reinvestment funds that are allocated to counties to reduce prison spending, from Portland's City Council and private dollars.

Scott Taylor, director of Multnomah County's Department of Community Justice, said he supports such a "collaboration conversation," but suggested reallocating existing resources.

Others at the meeting said it's easy to focus on downtown Portland, but homeless issues exist elsewhere in the city and in neighboring cities.

"If we can make it work in downtown Portland," Reese replied, "then Prosper Rockwood is next."

-- Maxine Bernstein

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