

Pilot Rock latest rural city struggling to keep police

By Phil Wright
East Oregonian

PENDLETON (AP) — The people of Pilot Rock want to keep their own police department.

But the city of about 1,500 has been without a police chief since the last one quit 11 months ago. City council in November fired officer Gary Thompson for lying. The city's other officer is completing the basic police course at the Oregon Public Safety Academy, Salem. If he graduates, he will have months of field training ahead of him before the state certifies him as an officer.

The hurdles of operating a police department in rural Oregon led Weston in 2014 and Athena at the start of 2015 to shut down their departments and contract with the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office for services. Pilot Rock residents spoke out against such a contract last week at a city council session to discuss the police situation.

Pendleton Police Chief Stuart Roberts said much of this is a consequence of what's happening nationally,

and the situation may not improve any time soon. A glut of people entered law enforcement from the 1970s through the early 1990s, he said, and now they are retiring and "leaving this big void."

Roberts said when he first took the Pendleton chief job 13 years ago he would receive a hundred applications for every opening. Last month, he said, 30 people applied for an open job. And only four of those passed the physical requirements.

Pilot Rock Mayor Virginia Carnes and Roberts said the problem becomes magnified for small rural communities. They tend to be more isolated, so relying on another agency can be tough. Enterprise in Wallowa County, for example, is in much the same boat as Pilot Rock, but there is no other nearby department to lend a hand.

Pilot Rock's police pay is competitive with similar cities, offering \$60,000-\$69,000 a year for a police chief. But that's about what Pendleton pays for a new officer, and tens of thousands less than what Hermiston, Pendleton

or Milton-Freewater pay their top cop.

Police departments as a whole are expensive. Pilot Rock's general fund is almost \$654,000. Some \$338,000 of that pays for the three-person police department.

That kind of price tag was one factor that led Weston to contract with the sheriff's office. Weston, population about 670, budgeted about \$185,000 for its two-officer department and now pays about \$115,000 per fiscal year to the sheriff's office to provide 40 hours of police work per week.

Roberts said lack of professional development is another factor affecting small departments. A three-officer department, for example, usually cannot afford the cost or the temporary loss of sending an officer to a week of training. And in a field that changes with new legislation and court rulings, he said, that can be problematic.

Roberts is a proponent of police department accreditation as a means to meet standards in an industry that lacks state or federal requirements. Pendleton achieved accreditation in 2009 from

the Oregon Accreditation Alliance. Roberts said getting there required building a sense of ownership throughout the department, from buy-in with police union members to having subordinates take charge of the fleet, training and more.

"Look, if you can't do this," Roberts said, "you should be out of the police business and contract for services."

But contracting for police services is a hangup for some Pilot Rock residents, who questioned if they would get their money's worth. Councilor James Hinkle said he emailed friends in Athena to get their input on that city's switch from its own force to the sheriff's office, which also employs Athena Mayor John Shafer as a communications sergeant.

One of Hinkle's friends said the city gave up local control with the contract, while two others said the deal has been helpful to Athena, with better police coverage and response times.

Roberts said he understands the concerns. A police department gives small cities a sense of identity and feeling

of security. And a local government contracting for services needs to make sure the contract fits their needs.

Pilot Rock for now is paying \$4,000 a month to Pendleton police for Cpl. Ryan Lehnert to handle police duties. Roberts told residents at the meeting that he is committed to helping their city, but doesn't know how much longer his department can sustain the deal.

The solution could come in a hybrid of the usual police contract and what Pendleton provides now.

Roberts said he has done some penciling out since the meeting, and it could be possible for Pilot Rock to pay Pendleton to provide a full-time police administrator. Pilot Rock, though, would still hire its own two officers.

Pilot Rock might not see any cost savings in that plan, but it would get a qualified department head and its own full-time officers.

Carnes said Pilot Rock plans to continue working to hire a chief, but if that does not work the council will again take another look at the situation.

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