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Bouncing checks

Some Eugene businesses aren't bouncing back from the effects of a poor economy, but more and more of their customers' checks are.

A new state law, which allows victims to collect greater sums from the bad check writer, went into effect Monday and may help alleviate the problem.

In September alone, the Eugene Police Department handled more than \$20,000 worth of bad checks, says Detective Tom Hooker, of the EPD's fraud detail.

The fraud detail, a two-man operation comprised of Hooker and Detective D.A. Norenberg, has statistics for almost 700 bad checks totaling more than \$158,000 that have been passed since January. Norenberg says he expects those statistics to top \$225,000 by the end of the year.

Four years ago, when Norenberg began working the fraud detail for the police department, he says those yearly figures added up to about \$65,000.

Norenberg and Hooker estimate that their statistics represent only 20-25 percent of the bad checks passed in Eugene.

Their detail has only enough time and manpower to take cases in which the check writer passed bad checks totaling \$200 or more. The remainder of reported bad checks are kept on file until the \$200 amount is reached, Hooker says.

"The merchants are really getting taken," he says.

Sometimes, the merchants "eat" bad checks rather than go through the hassles of reporting them, Hooker says. However, those stores don't pay the tab, he says.

"John Q. Citizen pays it."

Although Norenberg says the poor economy has "something to do with it," Hooker hesitates to blame all bad check writing on the economy.

"Paper crime — it's increasing," he says. "People are finding out how easy it is."

Bad check writing has a "snowballing effect" on people, Hooker says. "They'll write one or two here, one or two there, our telephone starts to ring, and sooner or later they hit that (\$200) mark."

The culprits are mostly amateurs — "people trying to make a fast buck, trying to beat the system," he says. Those people write bad checks for items such as athletic or stereo equipment, clothing, jewelry, groceries or travel fares — "luxuries," Hooker calls the items.

"They usually get caught,"

Often, when they do get caught, they're surprised at the severity of the consequences, Hooker says.

Passing bad checks is a Class A misdemeanor, carrying a maximum one-year jail sentence and/or a \$1,000 fine, Hooker says.

The Eugene Police Department fraud detail has an arrest record of approximately 77 percent, Norenberg says. Of that number, about 50 percent are prosecuted in court.

He attributes the high percentages mainly to easy access to hard evidence — the bad checks themselves.

In a recent case at the University, a student took three checks from her sorority sister and purchased clothing with them, Hooker says.

"She's basically an honest girl," he says. "The opportunity was there, but now there's no way she can walk by that sorority with her head up."

Another case involved a mail worker who allegedly stole checks from one of the University residence halls' mail rooms. Eugene police brought him back from Illinois to face more than 40 charges. That case is being tried now, Hooker says.

"I don't know how long he thought he could get by with it, but he didn't."

Stories by Marian Green
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University traces most bad checks

Bad check writing isn't limited to just businesses in Eugene — the University business office handles more than its share of bad paper.

While the Eugene Police Department reports tens of thousands of bad checks being passed yearly in the city, the University business affairs office processes more than 1,000 returned checks a year, says Mikal Hoffman, a business office employee.

The business office successfully collects from most of the students who pass bad paper because students aren't allowed to register the following term unless they make good on any unpaid funds, Hoffman says.

If the office can't collect that way, it has a couple of options.

One is taking the student to small claims court.

"Small claims is very effective," says Donald Thomas, the office's assistant business manager. He says about three-fourths of the cases taken to small claims court are ruled in favor of the University.

If the office still can't collect, they may resort to a revision of a state law that went into effect Monday, allowing businesses and victims to collect civil damages from the check bouncer.

Under the amendment, persons convicted of negotiating bad checks are "civilly liable" to the injured party for an amount equal to \$100 or three times the check's amount, not to exceed \$500 more than the check's value. However, the victim is required to make a written demand 10 days prior to taking action.

William Mc Laughlin, director of business affairs, says the business office will use the new amendment with discretion.

"We'll treat each case on its own merits," Mc Laughlin says. "We're going to give them a chance to make it right."

The University business office has received bad checks ranging from 50 cents to \$2,000, Hoffman says. And although the office levies a \$7.50 charge on each returned check, Hoffman says that fine doesn't cover the paperwork cost to process the bad paper.

"It's just a lot of extra work that nobody really needs," he says. It takes one full-time person to process the paperwork.

During the last fiscal year, 483 bad checks — or almost half — came from the EMU Main Desk alone, he says. Students can cash checks at the Main Desk for up to \$10 by showing their student identification card.

If a student's check is returned, the Main Desk revokes the student's check-cashing privileges for the remainder of the fiscal year, or until the student shows the Main Desk a letter from his or her bank indicating a mistake.

"A lot of times, it's a hassle because a lot of times it isn't their (the students') fault. But there's no other way we can do it," says Debby Martin, who works at the Main Desk.

Thomas says students with financial problems can obtain short-term loans from the University Financial Aid Office.

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