

Agency says violent crime rate declining



SALEM (AP) Some political ads are painting a picture of violent crime soaring in Oregon.

But according to the agency that tracks such statistics, the rate has been going down, not up.

"Usually violent crimes pick up a lot of press, but actually the rate of violent crime has gone down for three years in a row," said Ray Spooner, crime report coordinator for the Law Enforcement Data System. The agency compiles reports from state and local police agencies and also sends information to the FBI.

Crimes against people did rise during the first half of this year, but only by half of one percent. Property crimes, on the other hand, increased by 9.7 percent in the first six months.

Violent crime is the subject of several ballot measures and has become an issue in the governor's race, where both candidates promise to do something about it.

Denny Smith, the Republican contender, is pushing to expand prisons to lock up more violent offenders. Democratic candidate John Kitzhaber puts more emphasis on dealing with a spiraling juvenile crime problem.

Spooner said the crime rate

has declined in part because of the state's population boom, which has meant growth of about 2 percent a year. So even when more crimes are reported, the rate declines.

But in the first half of 1994, numbers of crimes against people also dropped in some major categories.

There were 21 percent fewer rapes, 13 percent fewer kidnappings and 27 percent fewer murder attempts. Bank robberies declined by 22 percent, and convenience store holdups were down by 45 percent.

"My general impression is there's not any new crime wave going on," said David Factor, director of the state Criminal Justice Council. "While crime still may be unacceptably high, nothing has happened in the last year or two years to indicate a crime wave."

State Rep. Kevin Mannix, D-Salem, sponsor of a measure on the Nov. 8 ballot to impose tougher minimum sentences of violent felons, says the battle isn't won just because the crime rate in that category is not rising.

"I'm not satisfied with the present rate of crime," he said. "I want to reduce crime. Otherwise it's like saying the unemployment rate is 15 percent but that's OK because it's not getting worse."

Boy charged with handgun possession

REDMOND (AP) — A Redmond High School sophomore accused of taking a gun to school faces criminal charges and expulsion.

Mark Allen Darms, 16, was charged with possession of a firearm in a public building and unlawful use and possession of a weapon after school officials found an unloaded .22-caliber revolver and some ammunition, according to Principal Dan Purple.

Darms was interviewed by a school security officer and taken to a juvenile detention center in Bend after a school administrator was tipped by a student Friday morning about a concealed weapon, Purple said.

Darms told authorities he wanted the gun because he was afraid an older youth might confront him after school.

Purple said rumors about students bringing guns to school have been circulating for years.

"Those reports have always been taken seriously," he said, "but in nine years, none have ever panned out before. This is the first time one of those rumors has played out as factual."

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High-speed train will include stop in Eugene area

SALEM (AP) — The first extension of a rail line that supporters hope to transform into a high-speed link between Eugene and Canada gives Willamette Valley commuters a new option to get to Portland.

Daily round-trips between Seattle and Portland have been expanded to include Oregon's second- and third-largest cities, Eugene and Salem, whose commuters have been increasingly clogging Interstate 5.

According to state estimates, the Willamette Valley population will grow by 700,000 over 20 years, which could increase traffic on some sections of Interstate 5 by a third.

The first step in the state's attack against traffic overload starts this week, when Amtrak begins its state-subsidized rail service between Eugene and Portland.

The extension is aimed at building ridership to eventually create a high-speed rail corridor from Eugene to Vancouver, British Columbia.

The 1993 Legislature approved \$10.5 million from video lottery dollars to start the project. Another \$2 million in federal money will help fund various programs, including supplemental bus lines to fill in service gaps.

Already the state has plans to test a modern Danish-designed IC3 train on the Portland-to-Eugene run in six months, said Robert Krebs, the Transportation Department's high-speed rail project manager.

The first trains will take 2 hours, 33 minutes between Portland and Eugene. The state hopes to reduce the time to one hour, 59 minutes by the end of the decade.

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