

ALL WELCOME

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- one-half hour meditation

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Limited resources make police prioritize

Lori Bettineski
Oregon Daily Emerald

Whether the crime committed is a drive-by shooting, disturbance of the peace or disobeying a "dogs on leashes only" sign, one thing is certain: The Eugene Department of Public Safety is likely to receive at least one call asking for assistance immediately.

In 1994 alone, public safety officials responded to more than 90,000 requests for assistance in crimes like these and others — a 13 percent increase over 1993. And with only 141 available officers, Dick Grimes, a Whiteaker district public safety officer, said "priorities" are what determine whether a request is granted or dismissed.

"The prioritizing starts out at murder and goes down to dogs at large," he said. "We simply cannot respond to every request with only 12 or 13 officers available to do so."

He said that after vacation time, days off and sick days are considered, only 12 or 13 of the original 141 officers are actually available to respond to calls during any given shift or hour.

That's the reason Robert England, a 67-year-old Eugene resident, decided to write a letter Feb. 7 to the editor of *The Register Guard* — not because he feels the public safety department lacks enough officers to meet his needs, but because one available officer decided that England walking his dog in an open meadow last week was a "priority issue."

For the past five years, England has taken Heidi, his 13-year-old golden retriever, for a walk twice a day in a deserted West Eugene meadow. On Feb. 6, a Eugene officer stopped England during his walk after receiving a complaint from a nearby resident that the dog had been off her leash.

England said the reason his dog had been "momentarily" off its leash was because he

had fallen in the mud and had to let the dog loose so he could recover from his fall. Yet when he explained this to the officer, he was told, "That's no excuse to avoid a ticket."

Although he didn't actually receive a ticket or citation, he said he thinks police priorities are "fouled up."

"I explained very nicely to the officer that I'd been walking my dog and picking up litter in the meadow twice a day for five years now and I even challenged him to find one piece of litter or dog dropping anywhere," he said.

"If someone with nothing better to do than worry about a duffer walking his dog in the rain can get the police to respond, then I must conclude that our priorities are fouled up."

He said he questions the public safety department's priorities because this wasn't the only time he has had a "conflict of interest" with an officer's response to a complaint.

He said that last summer he and his neighbors made three calls to the police because of constant rifle fire in the trees just a few yards from their homes.

The police didn't come out, partly because the 911 dispatcher said she couldn't locate his street, he said.

Three years prior to this incident, he said a deer was killed at 2 a.m. in front of his house. When he reported the automatic weapon firing, the police response was, "Happens all the time — nothing we can do about it."

"I honestly thought bullets were going to come through my bedroom wall," he said. "I would like to think the police are there when I need them, but if this happens regularly, I want to know if they intend to pursue dog matters instead of real crimes."

Although England's conclusion is that "Eugene just doesn't like dogs or old duffers,"

public safety officials say there's more to it than that.

"It sounds like we just happened to have had an officer free," Grimes said. "I would love to handle those [types of] issues but there just isn't the time."

He said he was surprised when he read England's letter because neither the Eugene Department of Public Safety nor its Whiteaker division have enough time or officers to cover a dog loose in a nearby meadow.

Whiteaker Public Safety, a satellite station of Eugene public safety, was developed five years ago to help deal with chronic complaints and to take some of the workload off the main department. Yet even with this addition, he and other police officials said more officers are still needed on the beat.

"We had a consultant from Sacramento here last year who said Eugene's police department is 20 positions short from meeting the demand of people's calls," Eugene police spokesman Tim Birr said. "We have added 10 positions since then, but we're still trying to get more added."

Grimes said that although he agrees with Birr that more help is needed, the public should not feel that their concerns or complaints aren't being addressed.

"We really do try and do the best we can and my sense is that they [community members] feel we do a pretty good job," he said. "We do have to spend a lot of time explaining why we can't answer their complaints sometimes, though."

Until the day does come when there is enough manpower to respond to requests like England's, Grimes said "priorities" will continue to be the deciding factor when spare moments, officers and funds remain limited while the need for police assistance in Eugene remains overwhelming.

City Council considering low-income housing plans

Suzanne Marta
Oregon Daily Emerald

The Eugene City Council discussed plans Wednesday to remedy the current housing crisis that has left many residents with few housing options.

Currently, Eugene has a vacancy rate of less than one percent, leaving many residents with nowhere to turn, according to Richie Weinman, housing and community development manager for the city of Eugene. Low-income families are having an especially hard time finding affordable housing, he said.

The council is considering subsidies for private sector contractors to build more low-income housing.

According to Weinman, such housing is more expensive to build due to the extra costs spent finding private and public grants and legal costs for land use appeals by neighbors who don't want low-income housing in their neighborhood.

Weinman said the housing shortage is due to Eugene's year-

ly one-percent population increase and a low building rate for housing units.

"There are about 1,000 people moving to Eugene each year and between 300 and 400 [housing] units built each year," he said.

Weinman said students play a big role in the housing market, especially in competing with low-income families.

"A bunch of students can go in on an apartment much easier than a mom with two kids who can't afford as much," Weinman said.

For students, the housing crisis means they will have to pay more in rent and will have to look for housing sooner.

"The rental shortage drives rent prices up," Weinman said. "If we increase supply enough, rent costs may go down."

According to Kirk Adams, manager of Blackstone Manor, all but a few apartment units are usually reserved for the next year by the end of May and by the middle of July everything is gone.

■ POLICE BEAT

The following incidents were reported to authorities Feb. 8-13:

- A 23-year-old female student was cited for shoplifting and petty larceny Feb. 8 at the Bookstore. The suspect attempted to steal cigarettes, Jelly Bellys and lighters worth \$18.00.

- A 20-year-old man was cited for having an open container of alcohol Feb. 11 on the 1000 block of Patterson Drive.

- A 17-year-old juvenile was arrested for assault and minor in possession of alcohol Feb. 11 on the 1300 block of Alder Street. According to police reports, the suspect became combative when a group of men started paying too much attention to the females he was walking with. A fight ensued and the suspect was lodged in the Lane County Jail.

- A University student reported menacing and unlawful use of a weapon Feb. 11 on the 1400 block of Alder Street. According to police reports, a fight that began at Guido's

spilled into the parking lot south of U.S. Bank. A member of the group of men involved in the altercation pulled out a silver semi-automatic handgun and threatened to "cap" others combatants involved in the melee. The man with the gun then got into a dark two-door sedan and left the area.

- A 34-year-old transient was cited for theft in the second degree Feb. 12 near the intersection of Franklin Boulevard and Agate Street. According to police reports, Office of Public Safety officers observed the suspect stealing a bicycle on campus. When they pursued him, the suspect dropped the bicycle and jumped into the Willamette River just west of the University bike bridge. As he was floating downstream, Eugene police officers used a public address system to tell the suspect to get out of the water before hypothermia set in. The suspect then swam to shore where he was treated by medics.

—Compiled by Joe Harwood

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