

One on One with the Chief

Two bad cops, police review, pepper spray, SWAT and more.

New EPD chief Robert Lehner arrived in Eugene in early January, in time to deal with one of the city's biggest police scandals ever: the criminal activity of male police officers engaged in sexually abusing women. So far, two officers have been arrested, but the investigation continues and inside rumors suggest several more officers may be in trouble. Under this cloud, EW requested an interview to discuss how Lehner intends to deal with this tragedy, and where he stands on other issues of concern to Eugene. Here is an edited version of a lengthy discussion that took place Feb. 20. Read the full version online at www.eugeneweekly.com

EW: You've been meeting with neighborhood groups and talking with many community leaders since you arrived. Have you talked to anyone in the community meetings about the two 'bad cops'?

RL: The meetings have not been specifically for that issue, but for getting acquainted. 'What are your issues? What do you say? What do you feel?' Getting to know each other. The subject has come up pretty frequently but I wouldn't say it's the number one thing on their minds.

EW: What has gone on within the police department with regard to sensitivity training around this issue?

RL: At the moment, it's de-stressing and debriefing, because people here are pretty freaked out by it, as you would expect. The public is understandably freaked out, but the cops are, too. This is not only not a good thing, it's a horrible thing, because people do ask them when they go out, when they're on a call: 'We'll get the 'Aren't you the guys ...?' or even in a friendly way, 'What do you know about this or think about this?' so it's a very common thing.

EW: So they're hearing about it?

RL: Oh, yes, they're hearing about it. I did meet with Margo Schaeffer of Womenspace and we talked about it, and our talk was more geared toward domestic violence but we did expand the issue quite a bit because it is an issue that is about power and

that transcends sexual assault into domestic violence and other areas.

EW: Do you feel there's been a climate here that needs to be improved as far as increasing sensitivity toward the issues?

RL: It's looking like it. Yeah. I wouldn't say there's a glaring absence, but just from some of the information I've received from Margo and others, it's leading me to believe we have some work to do there.

EW: How would you go about doing that training? What ideas do you have?

RL: First of all, exactly the nature of the training needs to concern, among other things, what went wrong. Until the second case adds the kinds of review that details what we need to do, we'll have to wait. That combined with input from frankly, experts like Womenspace and SASS and law enforcement experts will allow us to kind of gauge sort of where we are with respect to where we need to be and where we want to go. Within the organization there's this spectrum of where we are: from very sensitive, very attuned to the issues and understanding of what the issues are, to people who are frankly, oblivious.

EW: Would having an independent citizen review board in order to keep an eye on these sorts of things help?

RL: I'm not opposed to civilian review. I have no issue with it. The problem for communities who are trying to decide what this

review model is going to look like — and I have three different versions of it from Tucson I've been involved with over the years — is very fundamental ... the more power you give a review board, the more complicated and expensive it gets because you have to start balancing the rights of all parties involved much more delicately and so ultimately what you end up with is the systems that we want, tempered by what you can pay for.

EW: What would you suggest a community do if there is a frequent complaint against a police officer or officers or if there are things going on internally that just seem not quite right?

RL: The question is could or would a civilian review board, or a jury for that matter, be able to prevent the Magaña and Laras of the world? Because I think the quick answer to the question is no. They won't. ... The same things would have happened and ... the preventive effect of the review board compared to what's in place, frankly, is no different. And then the question is, Why would you go to the expense?

(Just as we went to press with this interview, Lehner told the R-G he thought the EPD's internal investigation mechanisms needed improvement and asked the Police Commission to examine the complaint process.)

EW: Here's a situation known to many people in Eugene. Your car gets broken into and the EPD tells you, 'We don't have the resources to follow up on those types of crimes.' But in a town with streets barely wide enough to drive it down, we've got a tank. We've got this very combat-ready SWAT team. What do you think of those priorities?

RL: As I understand it, we don't have a tank; it's the National Guard's tank.

EW: Yes, the National Guard tank. But EPD has access to it?

RL: We can use whatever we want of the National Guard's.

EW: When do you think it would be appropriate to roll that tank out?

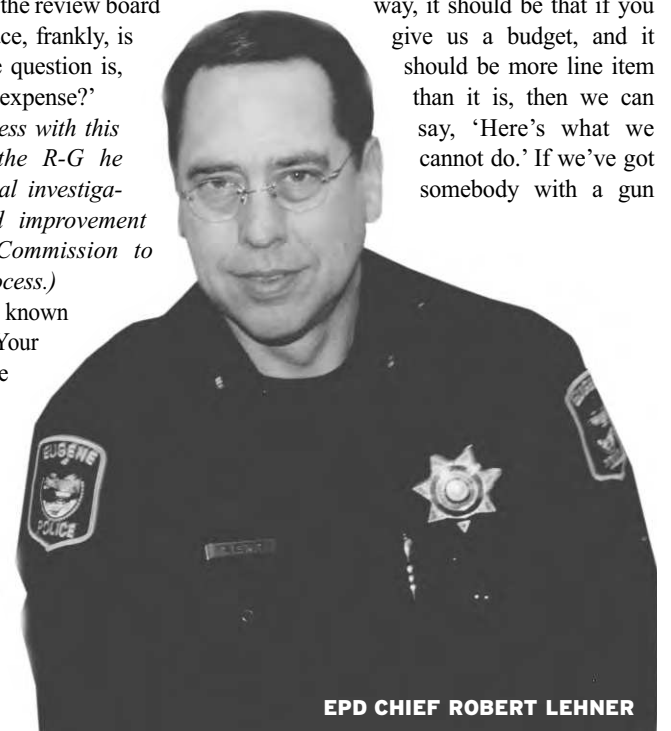
RL: I would say a life and death hostage situation.

EW: Not because you heard there's a marijuana growing operation in Whiteaker?

RL: Not gonna happen. *(A week after this interview was conducted, Lehner apologized to the Whiteaker Community Council for the tank/pot plant incident.)*

EW: What about the expensive SWAT team?

RL: Good question. It needs to be a community dialogue because if your car is burglarized and we do nothing because we don't have the resources and by the way, it should be that if you give us a budget, and it should be more line item than it is, then we can say, 'Here's what we cannot do.' If we've got somebody with a gun



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