

## County leaders address rising crime

BY CHARLES GLENN  
Of the Keizertimes

Business and civic leaders from around the Mid-Willamette Valley met Monday, May 2 at the Chemeketa Small Business Development Center in Salem to host a panel of elected and appointed Marion and Polk county officials on the subject of rising crime and public safety.

The discussion group, which usually meets monthly online, is a partnership between the Chambers of Commerce in Salem, Keizer, Silverton and Dallas. The group's focus is on how and what local communities can do to improve public safety in Marion and Polk counties.

Dominating the discussion topics was the intersection of mental illness, drug abuse, homelessness, crime and the resource limitations imposed by the COVID pandemic. The panel included both the Marion and Polk County sheriffs, district attorneys and county commissioners.

A non-profit advocacy group, Mental Health America, recently calculated Oregon as last in the country - 51st place - in mental health, using a cross-section of data covering substance abuse, homelessness, the uninsured and self-reported mental illness. They also count Oregon as 47th in mental illness among youth.

"I think, in general, the biggest challenge we're dealing with is this mental health crisis," said Marion County Sheriff Joe Kast. "We've been dealing with it for a long time, and it's co-occurring with a lot of other issues."



Marion County Commissioners Colm Willis and Danielle Bethell spoke at the Mid-Willamette Valley Public Safety and Crime Discussion, May 2, at the Chemeketa Small Business Development Center in Salem.

Photo by CHARLES GLENN of the Keizertimes

Polk County Sheriff Mark Garton said he would "totally agree" with Kast's remark, adding that the mental health crisis calls in Polk county have doubled in the past two years.

Garton said these calls are not simple - they are complex and time-consuming, and requires a lot of continual training for the officers involved.

More than one speaker made a point to say that panels like this are great at

identifying and describing problems, but less effective at coming up with solutions. That might be an oversimplification intended to convey humility, or it might be a reflection of the overlapping complexities of mental illness, homelessness, drug abuse, COVID and crime.

One point of agreement among both speakers and chamber members was a near-universal objection to several pieces of recent state legislation, in

particular 2020's Measure 110 and the recent Senate Bill 1510. Measure 110 mostly-decriminalized the personal possession of illegal drugs in Oregon and SB1510 placed a host of restrictions on law enforcement.

According to Garton, most of Polk County mental health crisis calls also involve drug use.

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## KeizerFEST moves to Keizer Rapids Park

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Starting this year, KeizerFEST will now be held in August, prompting speculation and public support for holding the event at Keizer Rapids Park. The Keizer Chamber of Commerce, who stages the event each year and is recommending the location change, sent an informal request to city hall recently for preliminary approval.

City Attorney Shannon Johnson said the chamber had already submitted all the necessary documentation and a formal request would be made to the council as soon as next month, but city staff members have not finished examining

the proposal.

"They are looking for at least a preliminary commitment from the council before they do a significant amount of work to the ground out there," Johnson told council members at the May 3 meeting.

City councilors promptly moved and seconded a motion to approve the chamber's request.

"Bob got his wish" said Councilor Dan Kohler, prompting laughter in reference to Chamber president Bob Shackelford's well-known desire to move the event to Keizer Rapids Park.

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