

Cannon Beach joins community conversation

Police chiefs, residents discuss how to improve interaction

By Katie Wilson
EO Media Group



JOSHUA BESSEX/THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Astoria Police Chief Brad Johnston, right, speaks during the Lower Columbia Diversity Project's "Cops and Community: A Local Perspective" discussion. Police on the panel included Seaside Police Chief Dave Ham, Warrenton Police Chief Matt Workman and Cannon Beach Police Chief Jason Schermerhorn.

Though Clatsop County police departments have not recently been involved in any racially-charged cases like the high-profile ones seen elsewhere in the nation, this summer, a Clatskanie police officer filed a complaint against Clatskanie police chief Marvin Hoover after Hoover allegedly made racist statements while being debriefed on the arrest of woman who had said she was being discriminated against. According to the officer, Hoover — who has since retired — compared black people to monkeys, sang "Dixie" and made monkey noises.

This incident and other more distant events reverberated in the questions members of the audience asked Thursday night.

Diversity

Astoria residents Andrew Marshall and Gladys Klingerman, the only two people of color present at the talk, asked

about the level of diversity at the various police departments. The chiefs admitted that none of their departments are particularly diverse. In all the departments combined, there are only a handful of women, Hispanic or Latino officers employed and no black officers.

Marshall, who has lived in the area since the late 1970s, pointed out that the county's demographics are changing rapidly. He and Klingerman asked about ongoing diversity training at the departments.

The chiefs said diversity in their departments remains a challenge. In small, rural departments where there are few chances for promotion, it can be hard to attract a wide range of good candidates, they said.

As the definition of what makes for good police work evolves, however, they have changed how they interview potential officer candidates, Ham said. His department, as well as the other departments,

now try to zero in on a candidate's core, asking how a candidate makes ethical decisions and examples of when the candidate has made such decisions.

The answers, Ham said, are deeply revealing.

In some cases, based on these answers, they haven't hired someone who, otherwise, earned high scores on the other tests the departments use to single out strong candidates, tests the departments used to rely on heavily.

And though diversity training is important, Johnston and Workman pointed out that, as social concerns go, the question of how to best deal with mental health issues tops the list here, not racism. There are next to no beds available for people who are experiencing a mental health crisis and need a safe place to go, the chiefs said. There are few local resources that officers can easily tap when they have questions or concerns while out policing or when emergency situations arise.

Community policing

Community policing is not a new concept on the coast, said Schermerhorn. It is something all the departments currently do, and have done for some time, to varying extents. This work goes beyond simply keeping the peace. It can look like funding a school resource officer who spends his or her time working with students; it can look like holding community picnics, giving neighborhood residents a chance to voice concerns in an informal setting. It often looks like getting out into the neighborhoods, getting to know people, being a trusted mem-

ber of the community.

Many times it is about forging partnerships with other groups or agencies that are better equipped to deal with the underlying issues like mental illness, substance abuse and family strife, the chiefs said. While local police might be the ones who respond first to a domestic violence call, strong partnerships with The Harbor, an organization that helps victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse, mean advocates trained to get victims the legal help and personal counseling they need are often present, too.

"In small cities like these, you really have to rely on one another and we currently do every day of the week," Schermerhorn said.

Clatsop County law enforcement is in a good place in many ways, the chiefs said. "We do have these — decades-long in some places — connections with our community," Johnston said.

But challenges remain. All the police departments are small and many struggle for adequate funding. In recent years, most have had to drop the school resource officer position, losing out on those face-to-face opportunities with kids in the schools.

Also, officers often show up in the middle of what has likely been a long-term problem. By forging strong relationships with community partners, police can be instrumental in solving some of these long-term problems, but ultimately, the chiefs said, this is the community's work.

These days, Johnston said, police have to be everything to all people. But often, he added, "We're just Band-Aids."

POLICE LOG

Sept. 27

3:47 p.m. Third Street beach access: driving while suspended, revoked. A vehicle got stuck.

6:24 p.m. Monroe Street beach: fireworks offense. Report of fireworks on the beach. The officer checked the area and was unable to locate.

Sept. 29

7:01 p.m. Arcadia Beach: DULL. Lindsey K. Erbes, 28, of Manzanita, was arrested for DULL, reckless driving, failure to drive within lane and breath test refusal. After breath test refusal, a search warrant was written. The officer obtained blood samples and Erbes was released to a responsible person.

8:42 p.m. 1100 block of Spruce Court: harassment. Report of harassing phone calls.

Sept. 30

5:27 p.m. 200 block of North Hemlock Street: forgery, fraud. Report of possible attempted fraudulent use of a credit card. Officer contacted the male who stated it was his card and the card he had accidentally tried to use belonged to an authorized user on his account. The officer confiscated the card and attempted to contact Capital One.

Oct. 9

10:29 p.m. 300 block of Elk Creek Road: disturbance. Report of intoxicated adults causing a noise disturbance. The officer contacted the group and warned for disorderly conduct.

Oct. 10

4:05 p.m. Rock Court and Gower Street: possession of methamphetamine. The officer contacted James S. McDuffie, 47, of Cannon Beach, for driving suspended and after further investigation, arrested McDuffie for driving with a suspended license, possession of methamphetamine and possession of Oxycodone.

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