

# Oregon businesses try to slow rising tide of shoplifting

## Salem Scene

By Jack Zimmerman

An exclusive to Oregon's weekly newspapers

People concerned about crime that costs Oregonians \$75 million each year gathered in Portland recently to study the situation.

The gathering was unique because it involved victims of this particular crime, police charged with apprehending perpetrators, prosecutors, judges and those attempting prevention through rehabilitation.

The crime is shoplifting, most often classified as petty thievery. But there's nothing petty about its magnitude.

Nationwide it costs merchants \$6.5 billion and it's a crime that has increased a staggering 35 per cent in the last five years. It has burgeoned to the point merchants now figure one of every ten persons entering their stores do so with the intent to steal.

The recent Portland meeting was conceived and con-

ducted by the Oregon Retail Council and the office of the Multnomah County District Attorney. For five years the Retail Council has been supporting a statewide campaign to slow the rising tide of shoplifting through public education. The on-going campaign is called STEM, an acronym for Shoplifters Take Everybody's Money.

The Portland meeting was a frank attempt to enlist law enforcement agencies involved in arrest, prosecution, sentencing and rehabilitating a growing number of petty thieves.

Attending the day-long affair were city and county police officials, district and circuit court judges, representatives of juvenile court, probation services and youth community service centers. They exchanged information with the district attorney's

office and representatives of large and small retail businesses, detailing problems each has in combatting what is largely considered a legal misdemeanor in Oregon.

Technically, most shoplifting consists of stealing merchandise valued at less than \$200. The law calls such crimes theft-two, theft in the second degree—a class-A misdemeanor punishable by fines of up to \$1,000 and imprisonment for not longer than a year.

From a practical standpoint, few shoplifters pay fines or go to prison—at least not those convicted under the theft-two statute. Seventy-five percent are amateurs, half the amateurs are teenagers and 65 per cent of all teenage amateur shoplifters are female.

Of 47 shoplifting cases convicted in Multnomah County

between Sept. 1977 and March 1978 (a 95 per cent conviction rate), 67 spent time in jail, often with added probation, restitution or fines. Ninety per cent received probation, frequently with added conditions—largely community service.

Retailers at the meeting expressed concern at the relatively small number of convicted shoplifters who receive harsh sentences. Judges explained their need to maintain neutrality in search of justice and staggering case-loads that prevent a higher level of personnel attention.

Multnomah County district court dockets involve as many as 150 cases a day, for instance, and one fourth involve theft-two—ninety per cent dealing with shoplifting. They discussed formation of a shoplifting court, uniformity of sentencing and diversion-

ary sentencing involving restitution and community service. ing involving restitution and community service.

Police also pointed to case-load problems involving rising numbers of all types of crime and the necessity of concentrating on major offenses, often at the expense of minor crime activity. Portland police cited as many as 500,000 calls for help in a single year, when the force is physically geared to handle less than half that number. They also urged merchants to prosecute once arrests are made, explaining that arrests without action are useless from their point of view.

Prosecutors made a strong case for greater understanding of the law on the parts of retail merchants and suggested on-going education—particularly among small business people—to increase the conviction rate following arrests.

Representatives of larger retail firms discussed the expanding costs of doing business in the process of providing professional security personnel and equipment. A major Portland department store budgets in excess of a million dollars annually for security and another half-million in related expenditures. Smaller merchants deplored a trend among their peers to accept shoplifting losses begrudgingly rather than spend the time involved in active prosecution.

Those employing only small workforces said they simply could not permit employees to spend hours or days in court to convict a thief accused of stealing an item that sells for less than the cost of prosecution.

After thoroughly airing their individual problems, participants came to some tentative conclusions they are willing to pursue in the future. Diversionary sentences, when facilities are available, was one. A shoplifting school, similar to those conducted for persons convicted for traffic offenses and alcohol abuse, was another. One judge said he could guarantee an ample student body if such a school was organized.

Generally, a better understanding of problems confronting all participants evolved and the group agreed to continue its efforts to produce a community approach in combatting shoplifting.

Impetus for this activity may be provided by shoplifting victims who were only incidentally represented at the meeting. They are the million or so wage-earning Oregonians, who pay up to \$75 a year more for the goods they buy just to cover the costs of what petty thieves steal.

### BMCC band tryouts will start tonight

Rehearsals for the Blue Mountain Community College college-community band and orchestra start Thursday, Sept. 28 at 7 p.m.

John Weddle, instrumental music director at BMCC, will hold the first rehearsal in the music building located in the McCrae Activity Center.

The band and orchestra groups are open to all wind, string and percussion players in Umatilla and Morrow counties, both students and adults. Weddle noted, "Everybody who plays an instrument from junior high age to senior citizen has participated in the past."

The music groups meet once a week and anyone may appear and participate. There is no fee charged and students enrolled at the college get credit for playing.

Dec. 3 has been set as the first concert date of the groups. For further information, contact John Weddle at the college 276-1260, ext 306 or at home 276-9621.

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