

Business crime has Chamber of Commerce brainstorming about law, policing

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Sun Correspondent
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The Gallup Chamber of Commerce hosted a public forum Sept. 21 to tackle some of the area's thorniest issues concerning crime.

Chamber CEO Bill Lee kicked the meeting off, by telling attendees that he drove by Dynamic Signs and discovered a display announcing five break-ins in the past 30 days.

Many other businesses around Gallup are faced with the same problem Lee described.

He acknowledged the level of frustration, but advised against trying to catch criminals personally.

"We in no way support the vigilantes," Lee commented. "People get hurt ... do not take matters into your own hands. I guarantee you that only ends badly for you in the end."

Instead, he suggested making property assessments to find and fix weak spots as one way to make it harder for people to break in.

During the forum, Lee and Gallup Police Chief Franklin Boyd went over some of the tactics the police department is working on to improve city safety.

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Boyd explained the Broken Window Policing Theory.

The theory states that if police don't address crime at the base level when it starts with a broken window, for example, or things that would be considered misdemeanors, crime can only continue to grow.

"The point of the broken window theory of policing is to continue to address those issues from the ground up," Boyd said. "Otherwise crime is going to grow like a weed. If you don't pull the weed early it's only going to get bigger and it's going to fester."

Boyd said one of the problems his police officers is facing is the citizens' expectations. When officers arrive at the scene of a crime, the victims often expect them to arrest the offender right away, even if they're not at the location.

"There's a very fine line between what my officers are allowed to do by law and not allowed," Boyd explained.

One misconception that Boyd and Lee wanted to clear up is the idea that police officers can only arrest someone if they catch them in the middle of committing a crime. Lee said some officers had been telling people this, but that statement is not true.

Lee explained that if a victim has a quality camera and the officers can see the suspect's face in the footage, catching them in the act in order to make an arrest isn't necessary.

Another issue that came up at the forum was understaffing at the police department.

The Gallup Police receive an average of 150 calls a day, and they currently have six vacancies in the department.

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Lee suggested a couple of ways they could recruit more officers, including a possible signing bonus. In addition, he argued that the police budget, which is currently based on the city's population, actually needs to be based on the number of calls police receive in order to provide quality service.

The Gallup Police Department said it had more than 1,700 residential and business alarm calls for service in 2020. So far, in 2021, that number stands at almost 1,400.

Other solutions mentioned at the forum included a pre-arrest diversion program for low-level non-violent crimes driven by substance abuse, a warrant round-up, crafting legislation for the January session in Santa Fe, and a chamber community crime coalition.

The chamber community crime coalition would consist of people willing to testify about crime, when related legislation is introduced at the Roundhouse. More than 30 people have signed up so far. Lee invites anyone interested to join the coalition by contacting him, Lori Parra, or Cecilia Perez at (505) 722-2228.

Lee said he wants to have another meeting with judges. The focus will be on what laws to address in order to make it easier to sentence offenders. No date has been set.

Beth Blakeman contributed to this article.

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