



August 5, 2020

In the maelstrom of a global pandemic and a nation reckoning with a legacy of racism, injustice and violence against black and brown people, police departments, and the elected officials accountable to and for those departments, are facing unprecedented scrutiny. To my way of thinking, that's a good thing.

Over the course of the last 14-and-a-half years serving as Missoula's mayor, I've bucked against the status quo, believing that our local government can improve and better serve the community through intentional, incremental change. Whether reforming zoning code, acquiring a water system in the public interest, expanding and upgrading our parks system, filling more potholes, upgrading a wastewater plant, committing ourselves to ending homelessness or building new fire stations, we've made a lot of change in the interest of making Missoula the best place it can be for all of its residents. That work is never done and I'm not done doing that work.

And I don't believe the status quo in our police department is satisfactory, any more than it is in any department, including the mayor's office. We learn, we grow, we adjust to evolving community values and priorities. In 2015, when the United State Department of Justice told me that our department, along with the University of Montana and other partner agencies, engaged in a pattern and practice of discriminating against women in cases of sexual assault, we went through a painful process of acknowledging our weaknesses and correcting our policies and procedures to ensure we were working with victims to ensure justice. Today, we are a model department in investigation of sexual assault and we employ techniques and processes that combine compassion and trust in victims, independent reviews of our work and collaboration with other in the legal system to hold perpetrators accountable.

That is police reform writ large. It was painful, required self-reflection, accountability, a willingness to change and investment. We're better at taking care of our community because of our investment in training, policy development and infrastructure.

And amid the calls for police reform today, I continue to believe that investment in training, policy development and infrastructure is necessary to improve, and that improvement must be intentional.

I don't think the Missoula Police Department was broken before George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, nor do I think the department is broken today. What's changed is that folks are paying more attention, rightly so, and want to know that I and the Missoula Police Department are keenly aware that our community has high standards for public safety and police officers, won't tolerate the moral failures and criminal acts that may have become common in some departments around the country and wants us to continue to improve.

We are keenly aware. And we know we can improve. You'll see some statistics today about our use of force. Both Chief White and I want to understand what those statistics represent, whether our policies, procedures and training are appropriate to the challenges of ensuring public safety for everyone. Every time we use force to maintain public safety, we need to be sure that the force was necessary and matched the level of threat to public safety. And while we document and review each of those cases, we believe that process can and should be more transparent to those we serve, which is why Chief White is proposing a resident advisory council, outside of the police commission, to the chief and mayor on public safety. In addition, Chief White will produce an annual report to the community. And, as always, our doors are open

to hear complaints and concerns and assist residents with formal or informal processes to address those complaints and concerns.

In the meantime, we know this: a better-educated police officer is a more effective police officer. Chief White brings considerable experience to bear in leading the Missoula Police Department and in his review of our department, he immediately recognized that our training, across the board, was inadequate. You'll see that addressed in this budget, with continuing education and advanced training for all officers. You'll also note an emphasis on bias and de-escalation, two of the critical concerns of the community.

In addition, you'll note that we're expanding our training in crisis intervention, because until there's a federal or state solution to helping folks in crisis, even with our mobile-crisis team, Missoula police officers will continue to serve in that vital role, meeting people in crisis where they are, stabilizing the situation and connecting those in crisis with appropriate services. As we continue to invest in alternative responses, there may come a day when an officer isn't the first responder to a behavioral-health crisis, but that's not going to happen overnight, so I want officers who are well-trained to help people in crisis 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

We also know that community policing works through our long partnership with the Missoula Downtown Business Improvement District and our dedicated downtown police officer, who has built relationships with residents, businesses and property owners that are meaningful, compassionate and productive. That officer, working in partnership with a social-work students, is solving problems daily, helping folks find resources, making vulnerable individuals feel safer and preventing crime by being visible and available. Because we applied for and received a federal grant to hire an addition downtown officer, we'll be expanding that community policing model in the area. And Chief White will tell you more about our community policing goals in his presentation. That federal grant also lets us hire an officer to review digital evidence, of which there is more than ever, to help solve crimes and meet community expectations.

Chief White and I agree that we have an obligation as leaders and that the community shares an obligation to keep our public-safety personnel as safe as possible in a dangerous calling. Toward that end, we're asking for helmets officers can wear when facing armed individuals, in the same way we provide those helmets to firefighters when they expose themselves to danger as part of their jobs. Today, with ballistic vests, we're protecting officers' hearts but leaving their brains vulnerable. And part of keeping officers safe means providing them a safe place to store their gear, shower and change clothes. As you'll see, those showers and lockers are nothing fancy, but will go a long way in making our workplace more humane and safe for officers and their families. And in light of COVID-19, this just makes sense.

We have some old rolling stock, and again, in any other year, no one would give a SWAT van or utility trailer a second look. You'll see in Chief White's presentation what we're looking to replace and what we're planning to purchase. And it's not an armored vehicle, as some internet rumors would suggest. We're also replacing some vehicles that have outlived their usefulness.

In the end, I'm proposing on behalf of the department and Chief White funding these investments in a police department that isn't broken but isn't perfect, that works hard but could work better, in officers who are eager to learn more and do better work and to help more people. We will be more accountable because of these investments.

This investment isn't mutually exclusive of meeting the needs of vulnerable souls in our community, nor does it detract from our intentional efforts to support basic human needs, chief among them housing. This council has approved nearly \$10 million dollars over the last few weeks to support affordable housing in Missoula, along with ongoing investments in ending homelessness, providing emergency shelter, supporting food programs and more. In 2018, I created a department dedicated to helping the most vulnerable in our community and that department continues to expand its mission as the federal and state governments continue to abdicate responsibility. Local government is left to do work it's never done before, but we're adapting and facing that responsibility with some chagrin and plenty of resolve.

If we didn't invest in the way we're proposing, we'll continue to do the work that's expected but not at the level I believe this community desires, demands and deserves. And if we were to go further and cut the police budget, calls would go unanswered, folks in crisis would go unattended and we'd prevent, investigate and solve fewer crimes. Most of our budget is invested in human beings, the women and men who do the daily work of public safety, and cutting the budget simply means eliminating positions, and that has consequences to the community that I find unacceptable.

Chief White and I believe that the Missoula Police Department can be a model for other communities hoping to maintain a safe, equitable home for their residents and visitors and that we're just beginning the process of making a good department great. We want to take advantage of community interest in doing all of what we do better and believe that these requests are thoughtful, intentional and will yield results that improve the lives of those we swore to serve.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Engen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "E".

John Engen  
Mayor