

John Lombard, Candidate for City Council, District 5: Position Statement on Public Safety

Public safety is the core responsibility of government. And it is not faring well in Seattle, particularly regarding property crime, where Seattle recently [ranked second among the 20 largest cities in the country for its rate of reported property crimes](#), adjusted for population size.

This brief paper can only touch on some of the most important ways in which the City Council can help the City meet its public safety obligations, including:

- Ensuring that the Seattle Police Department (SPD) meets its constitutional obligations to avoid excessive force and racially biased policing;
- Planning for the future of the North Precinct;
- Staffing SPD adequately during a time when retaining and recruiting officers has been a serious challenge;
- Supporting additional human services (such as Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion, or “LEAD”) to supplement law enforcement in ways that can reduce crime over the long-term; and
- Advocating for changes in the criminal justice system that effectively address the challenges of repeat offenders, who are responsible for a vastly disproportionate amount of crime.

Constitutional Policing

The 2010 shooting death of First Nations woodcarver John T. Williams by a Seattle policeman, and a series of other serious incidents involving Seattle police and people of color, ignited public concern about bias and the use of excessive force by SPD. This led to a federal investigation, which found a pattern of excessive force violating federal law, and which also raised serious concerns that some SPD practices could result in discriminatory or biased policing.

The City and the Department of Justice entered into a [Consent Decree](#) in 2012 as a legal settlement of the issues raised by the investigation. In January 2018, after much progress across a wide range of issues, the federal judge presiding over the decree found SPD in “full and effective compliance” with its requirements. The City must sustain this level of compliance for two years before the Consent Decree is terminated.

Continuing compliance with the Consent Decree must obviously be a top priority for SPD. Minimizing the use of force and respecting the civil rights of all, including suspected criminals, is the legal and moral responsibility that comes with the government’s monopoly of the right to use force. It is also crucial to gaining the trust of people of color and other vulnerable populations, which make up a large portion of District 5’s population. Constitutional policing is necessary for both justice and peace.

North Precinct

The current [North Precinct headquarters](#) in the Northgate area is undersized, substandard and needs to be replaced. The question is, with what?

The [North Precinct currently includes all of Seattle north of the Ship Canal](#): about 40% of the City’s geography and population, making it more than twice the size of any of the City’s other four precincts. Given the need to strengthen community connections with SPD and the geographic separation of North Seattle communities where that need is strongest (e.g., Ballard, the University District, Aurora, Lake City), the City should divide the North Precinct in two, supplement the main headquarters with satellite facilities, or both.

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The City already owns property on NE 130th St just off Aurora that was the planned location for a new North Precinct headquarters during an earlier planning process. [That process was suspended in 2016](#), after concerns were raised about the cost of the new facility (which would also have included space for additional officer training, as required in the Consent Decree, and for an emergency operations center). Those concerns were heightened by ongoing frustrations with broader racial inequities in the criminal justice system.

As the City comes back now to reconsider plans for the North Precinct, the NE 130th St property should remain a leading candidate for a new precinct headquarters. It is located near some of the most important crime hotspots in north Seattle. A major public investment there would help anchor and stimulate substantial additional investment in the most neglected urban village in north Seattle. But the City must also seriously explore additional police facilities in North Seattle.

SPD Staffing

In 2016, former Mayor Ed Murray announced a plan to add 200 police officers by 2019, a goal that current Mayor Jenny Durkan endorsed in the most recent City budget. Actual experience has been different: [SPD had a net loss of 41 officers in 2018](#), with 109 officers and recruits leaving while only 68 were added. Overall, there has been little change in the number of officers since Mayor Murray's announcement.

The new contract between the City and police officers, adopted last fall, makes Seattle police the best paid in the state, after four years of no pay increases while the new contract was being negotiated. The City Council also recently approved hiring bonuses of \$15,000 for fully trained officers coming from other departments. These moves should certainly help with staffing, although SPD is nearing the peak of a predictable wave of retirements (many current officers were hired in the early 1990s, with the help of a Clinton-era federal crime bill).

SPD is also facing morale issues related to Seattle's homelessness and opioid abuse crises. Unauthorized encampments that are removed but then reappear at new unauthorized locations, repeat offenders who are quickly released back to the streets after arrest, and open drug use and other violations of law that officers say they have been instructed to tolerate all contribute to Seattle police officers retiring early or transferring to other departments. Reforms in the City's homeless programs, as discussed in a separate position paper, and reforms in other parts of the criminal justice system, as discussed below, could help address some of these frustrations.

In addition, the City should increase its hiring of community service officers (CSOs) to supplement uniformed officers. CSOs can help in SPD's work with the homeless, runaway youth, the mentally ill, neighborhood disputes, crime prevention, and other activities. CSOs are less expensive, more easily hired, and more quickly trained than uniformed officers. The City could also increase the number of its crime prevention officers, which are currently allocated one per precinct—making for a particularly significant shortage in North Seattle, with its one precinct.

Additional Human Services

I have long advocated for continued growth of the [Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion \(LEAD\) program](#), which was first expanded to North Seattle last year. LEAD trains police officers to identify low-level offenders who would be much better served by referral to intensive case management and social services than by entering the criminal justice system. The resulting partnership between the police and

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social services has been successful enough (measured in reduced crime, reduced public costs, and improved client outcomes) that the client base for LEAD has been expanded beyond offenders to include referrals of others who are experiencing homelessness or mental illness.

Many other human service programs provide public safety benefits, including expanded substance abuse treatment, programs serving victims of domestic violence, and mental health services. Restorative justice and other programs that divert youth from incarceration also can provide long-term public safety benefits. Restorative justice can transform people, relationships and communities by repairing the harm caused by criminal behavior. Ideally, it involves all affected stakeholders meeting directly to determine a resolution, with the offender making amends agreed to by the victim.

In addition, expanded hours and recreational programming at community centers can provide significant public safety benefits, by offering healthy alternative activities and mentorship for youth.

Strengthening other aspects of the criminal justice system

A recently released report, "[System Failure: Report on Prolific Offenders in Seattle's Criminal Justice System](#)," provides shocking evidence of how a subset of criminals are responsible for a vastly disproportionate amount of Seattle's crime. A sample group of 100 criminals, selected for having been arrested at least four times in a rolling 12-month period, was found to be collectively responsible for 3,600 reported state-level and 1,600 reported municipal-level crimes (and, of course, many crimes go unreported—especially shoplifting and other forms of theft).

Police are arresting these criminals, but they are typically released quickly back to the streets. Every offender in the sample had indications of substance abuse, but almost no treatment was offered. Every offender who was released before trial violated terms of their release. Every offender whose sentence was suspended violated at least some conditions of the suspension. Most offenders, the report said, "have cycled in and out of the criminal justice system for years with no apparent impact on their problem behaviors and no relief for the neighborhoods that they victimize."

The report noted that the system fails the offenders, too: "Cases drag on for months or years; obligations are imposed even where there is virtual certainty that the defendant cannot meet them; bench warrants hang over their lives creating the risk of incarceration at any moment; vulnerable individuals are released from the jail at midnight; and there is little meaningful effort to address the underlying causes of their criminal behavior."

The report acknowledges that there are no simple answers to these problems. Most of the parties with key roles in solutions—the courts, the Prosecuting Attorney's Office, the City Attorney's Office, the corrections system—are not under the control of the City Council, or even of City government. As a City Councilmember, I would still loudly advocate for change. I also would recognize that a successful response must go well beyond the criminal justice system, to include substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, and other human services, including housing.