From: Geoff Easton
To: Grp. City Council and City Web Site; Mayor Staff
Subject: Who are we? Who can we be?
Date: Wednesday, June 17, 2020 11:28:20 AM

06/17/2020

Dear Mr. Mayor and City Council,

Well, it has been quite a 2020 so far and we just creeped over the halfway mark. Hang in there, we can get through this and perhaps, if not probably, build a stronger more resilient community because of all we have endured.

With the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmed Arboury and quite a few other people of color recently, protests have erupted nationwide in response. One theme that has emerged from this movement is the idea to de-fund the police. It is in fact a worthy idea and I encourage you to take up the discussion seriously, but perhaps not for the reasons you suspect.

The Missoula Police Department is by and large a respected and well trained unit. Many of us take the Mayor at his word that Chief White has the skills, background and training to lead a department in these times. Missoula can be a bit of an island, we don't see a lot of the same abuses that happen in other places. This is, as well all know, MIssoula's curse and blessing. Because we are 'different,' we are, well, different. But his is actually not the case and we should not as a community assume it to be true.

The crime rate in the U.S. has fallen steadily since the mid 1990's, and violent crimes have led this trend. There are many factors, some unknown, some unknowable, that have led to this decline, but in real and relative terms the average U.S. citizen of any type is safer from their fellow citizens than anytime in our history. Belying this trend, however, is a steep rise in incarceration, exploding police budgets, and a continued if not growing problem of police brutality against those they are charged to protect. One of the factors driving this growth is that so many new laws have been passed across the country that make things like being poor, vulnerable, addicted or generally just 'other,' illegal and under the jurisdiction the local police force.

Missoula is no exception in this growth of laws intended to maintain social order and in fact should now take the opportunity to revisit one area where the police have been given powers that they are ill equipped to deal with.

In October of 2014 MIssoula enacted statute 9.03.010 entitled the City of Missoula Solicitation and Aggressive Solicitation as Acts of Disorderly Conduct Act. This was colloquially known at the time as the 'aggressive panhandling law.' Put aside other

complaints about this law, that it targets being poor, it has a hint of denying free speech and free assembly and that it in practice targets a generally Native American crowd, the real issue is that it (again) introduced police work into a situation where they have little training or background, few means of working towards a successful outcome and put officers into a situation where they just play 'whack-a-mole' with the same group of people over and over, all year long.

Now, I could probably live with this law, but it is a perfect example of how social ills have become criminalized and put into this box that came under the purview of police. Now is a perfect opportunity to revisit this kind of law and take a look at how we police, what we police and what we as a community want handled differently.

So, yes, de-fund the police. Figure out what the cost is in policing Missoula Code 9.03.010 and direct that money to social service entities that can actually assist 'aggressive panhandlers' and perhaps effect long-term change in this regard. No one is saying don't police bank robbers or rapists, but what we are saying, in part, is that social issues that are often real don't need to fall under the purview of law enforcement. Homelessness, addiction, curfews... the list is long. When you criminalize social ills, you introduce people to the criminal justice system that otherwise would never be exposed to it. Some pay their fine and move on, some get sucked into a cycle of recidivism and resentment that follows them for a long time.

We can do better. We can and should have a long in-depth discussion about how we want to live in this town, how we can make each other feel safe and how we can all work to develop a community that cares about each and every last one of us. But a large, growing police force that is expected to wear too many hats in an increasingly complex world is not the answer.

I encourage the Mayor, Chief White and all City Council members to take a deep and honest look at the Police budget and be honest in their assessment of 'Is This Who We Want To Be.'

Sincerely,

Geoff Easton
Ward 1