

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Should WA police be able to pursue stolen vehicles? 16 Pierce County mayors think so

BY SHEA JOHNSON

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A public safety forum at the University Place City Hall on Wednesday evening brought together city leaders and law enforcement officials from cities around Pierce County to share with legislators their proposed changes to police reform legislation that they feel has hampered their abilities to fight some crimes. BY TONY OVERMAN



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Sixteen mayors in Pierce County have urged state lawmakers to act on an “alarming” increase in local crime, including motor-vehicle thefts and youth offenses, and address what local leaders called the unintended consequences of well-meaning police reforms.

“Recent changes to state laws necessitate additional state investment in public safety,” the mayors wrote in an Oct. 27 letter to the county’s legislative delegation. “The problems we now see with open drug use, increased stolen vehicles, increased property crime, increased eluding from police, and an overall disregard for public safety are not unique to our cities and towns. It is happening everywhere.”

In the letter, the municipal leaders requested five policy considerations for the upcoming legislative session. Among them: tweaking Washington’s controversial police pursuit law to enable law enforcement to chase stolen vehicles.

“We have to show some discretion, but we should not say, ‘We should never pursue,’” Lakewood Police Chief Patrick Smith said Wednesday, Nov. 1 at a public safety meeting that brought local and state officials to University Place City Hall to discuss the legislative proposals.

The meeting, the second of its kind after one held in Lakewood, sought to convey to state legislators the significant rate at which certain crimes have increased [in the wake of specific state laws enacted in 2021](#). Smith presented statistics prior to and after the implementation of House Bill 1054 and House Bill 1310 that limited when police could engage in pursuits and restricted law enforcement’s use of deadly force, respectively.

The bills were passed amid calls for police accountability and racial justice in the wake of police killings of people of color, including George Floyd and [Manuel Ellis](#). Pursuits had raised concerns as being dangerous when they were limited under the wider-ranging HB 1054 legislation. Last year, [restrictions on when police could chase after vehicles were eased](#) but still exclude crimes such as auto thefts and residential burglaries.





Lakewood police chief Patrick Smith discusses the effects of police reform legislation on crime rates in his community during a public safety forum at City Hall in University Place, Washington, on Wednesday, Nov. 1, 2023. Tony Overman toverman@theolympian.com

In Lakewood, the monthly average for motor vehicle thefts more than doubled in the two years after the pieces of legislation were enacted, compared to the two years prior, according to Smith's presentation. The number of cases of people eluding police also rose from 2.5 on average per month to 25.5 over roughly the same period.

Local leaders said vehicle thefts were often associated with other crimes and, when cities and towns had control over when to chase a suspect, pursuits were relatively infrequent because local policies weighed public safety.

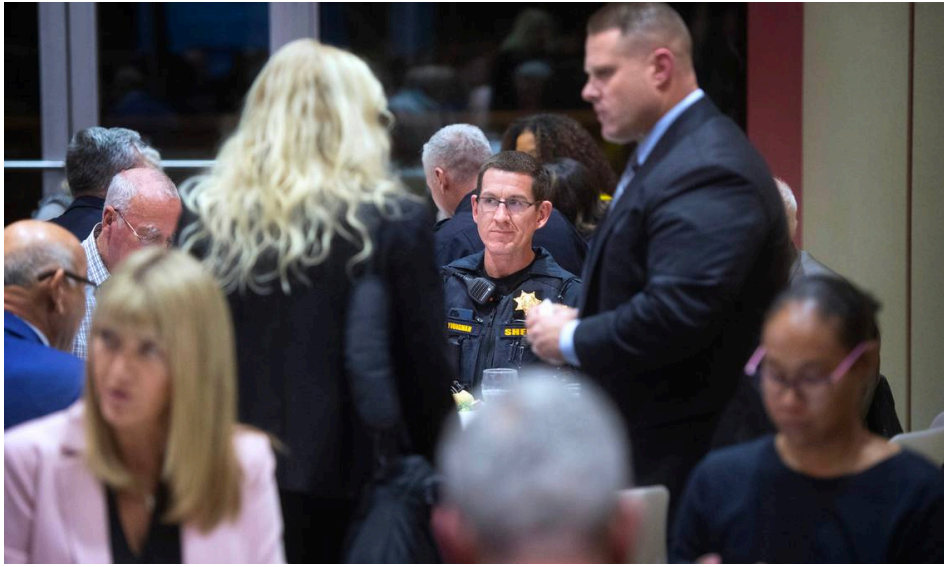
"Unfortunately, offenders are currently using the state's vehicular pursuit laws to their advantage by using a vehicle in the commission of their criminal activity, an unintended consequence of a well-intentioned public safety goal," the letter read.

After House Bill 1140 went into effect, the number of known juvenile suspects in assault, robbery and vehicle-theft cases more than doubled in the city, compared to the five-year average, presentation materials showed. The bill, which also passed in 2021, prevents law enforcement from interviewing people under 18 years old in connection to a crime [without first providing access to an attorney](#).

Local leaders called the process "cumbersome" and said the bill had resulted in police having to make arrest decisions without hearing the juvenile's "side of the story" and also prevented early intervention to keep young people from entering the criminal-justice system. Bill proponents had argued that the legislation protected young people's rights and youth of color from being disproportionately stopped by police.

City and town officials expressed during the meeting and in the mayors' letter to state lawmakers that they had seen similar crime trends as Lakewood in their jurisdictions, including upticks in open drug use.

"We are concerned about the alarming increases in crime rates and a growing lack of trust in the government's ability to protect residents and businesses," the letter read.



Edgewood police chief Jason Youngman (center) and other participants talk during a public safety forum at City Hall in University Place, Washington, on Wednesday, Nov. 1, 2023. Tony Overman toverman@theolympian.com

The mayors, who referred to themselves as “a bipartisan group of local leaders,” requested that the state Legislature provide additional money to enforce and prosecute vehicle thefts and property crimes; create ongoing funding for crisis response and diversion programs; enable parents or guardians to be able to offer consent for law enforcement to interview juveniles; and help boost the number of police officers by expanding training opportunities and eliminating associated costs to agencies.

The letter’s signees included mayors from Lakewood, Puyallup, University Place, Bonney Lake and Gig Harbor. As leader of the county’s largest city, Tacoma Mayor Victoria Woodard’s signature was noticeably absent. Tacoma City Council member Keith Blocker attended the Nov. 1 meeting, where he said that a broader conversation was needed beyond the legislative proposals.

“I don’t think that’s the end all to be all,” Blocker said. “It’s a way that it can be addressed, but the crimes that we’re talking about right now are what I like to call crimes of desperation.”

Blocker noted that local issues under the spotlight were also prevalent across the nation, adding that he was unconvinced they were products of action taken in Olympia. A social-media trend [has led to a rash of thefts of Kias and Hyundais](#). Fentanyl use is [a significant issue in many places](#). State and local governments throughout the United States have [sued pharmaceutical companies for their role in the opioid crisis](#).

“We’re not going to legislate our way out of these particular problems,” he said.

While the mayors’ proposals “will and can address some of the problems that we’re discussing,” he added, officials must also employ other strategies to curtail crime that include providing services to families and resources to schools.

Kent Keel, a University Place Council member, said concerns about policing that spurred recent reforms were as valid as acknowledging that the pursuit law wasn’t working. He requested that officials work to find a middle ground.

“I think both ends of the spectrum are true,” Keel said. “This is not a binary decision.”

Rep. Mari Leavitt, D-University Place, said the question was how do officials bridge the gap between public and law enforcement concerns. She and state Sen. Steve Conway, D-Tacoma, encouraged local leaders to remain engaged and assured them they had been heard. Conway said finding common ground was key, adding that he suspected lawmakers would work on the pursuit law during the upcoming session, where he expected to hear a similar debate.

“I think what you’re doing here is important,” he said.

Others to sign the letter to state lawmakers included mayors from DuPont, Fircrest, Orting, Ruston, Sumner, Buckley, Eatonville, Milton, Pacific, Roy and Steilacoom.

Lakewood Mayor Jason Whalen said the Nov. 1 meeting was timely on the cusp of the new legislative session, which starts in January, and that state lawmakers could feel confident in the community of voices that had come together to share the commonality of their experiences.

“So, if we’re asking you for some changes to be made,” he said, “you got support (from) the cities and towns in Pierce County.”

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