

Some Tacoma residents feel crime is ‘taking over.’ They demand change from the city TNT 10/18.2021

Angela Connelly is worried about rising crime in Tacoma, and she says she’s not alone. In talking with other Tacoma residents and business owners over the last couple months, Connelly said she’s heard repeated stories of crime and lack of police response. “There’s definitely a heightened sense throughout the community that crime is taking over,” Connelly told The News Tribune earlier this month. “I can tell you so many stories about people who are having personal experiences right now.”

Connelly, a longtime Tacoma resident herself, co-founded a new campaign this month called Tacoma Safe, which claims 200 residents and business owners as members. Its focus is on addressing rising violent crime and homeless encampments. It also intends to clean up trash and graffiti in an effort to serve the community.

Connelly joined Kristen Wynne, owner of Tacoma’s Historic 1625 Weddings & Events, and Monique Patterson, executive director of nonprofit Next Step, to create the campaign, which was inspired in part by a letter from three Council members — Robert Thoms, Lillian Hunter and Conor McCarthy — in August that pushed for increased police patrols, citing an uptick in crime and the lowest staffing level of police in years.

“I run a housing complex for vulnerable women (and) their children working hard to escape poverty and, in many cases, domestic violence. When there are threats to my residents, I call 911. At times I have been told that no police will come, ‘you will just have to protect yourself,’” Patterson said in a press release.

As part of the Tacoma Safe effort, Connelly and other members of Tacoma Safe traveled Thursday to O’Reilly Auto Parts on Sixth Avenue to clean graffiti off the building. Store manager Sarah Burton told The News Tribune that one of the business’ truck windows was smashed Wednesday evening by thieves who stole a battery. “I’ve been here 4-1/2 years, and this is the most crime I’ve seen,” Burton said. “The staff is leery. Society is going downhill fast.”

According to a presentation from TPD staff to City Council in August, the number of property crimes has trended down in recent years, with 12,120 reported cases from January to July 2017, and 11,595 reported cases from January-July 2021. Property crimes include burglary, larceny/theft, motor vehicle theft and arson. Arson is the only property crime that has continually increased year-over-year since 2017.

Meanwhile, violent crimes in Tacoma have increased since 2017, with 2,250 reported cases from January to July 2017 to 2,405 cases in the same time frame of 2021. Violent crime includes murder/manslaughter, aggravated assault, sex offenses and robbery. Last year, Tacoma had 32 homicides, the highest number since 1994, when there were 33, The News Tribune’s Stacia Glenn reported last month. So far this year, Tacoma has had 23 homicides.

Between January and July 2020 compared to the same time in 2021, police patrol response times have increased on average by 18 seconds for life-threatening emergency calls and 22 minutes for low-priority, routine calls, according to city data.

The lower response times trend alongside a reduction in staff at TPD. The number of vacant positions within the Tacoma Police Department is increasing. There were 15 vacant positions (4 percent of total positions) in November 2020. There were 42 vacant positions (12 percent of total positions) in October 2021, according to city data. At least 34 of those the 42 vacant positions are patrol officer positions.

In a City Council study session on Sept. 28, TPD interim Chief Mike Ake said people have been leaving TPD at a higher rate than in previous years, either from retirements or general separations, including resignations or terminations. In 2016, nine people retired and three left the department. In 2021 so far, 21 people have retired and 11 have left the department for other reasons.

Ake told Council members that morale was also a factor. "I will tell you that morale has a lot to do with what's happening and why people are leaving, and I'm just going to be blunt," Ake said. "... If (employees) don't feel supported by the leaders within the city organization ... it's going to affect if and why people want to leave."

The demands Tacoma Safe members are asking the city to lower crime rates, reduce response times and better address homeless encampments by taking a number of steps. The group has also launched a petition with those same demands that has collected more than 650 signatures.

First, the members want City Council to remove the motion put in place last year that halted the city from hiring about 25 officers to fill vacant positions, saving the city about \$5 million. The city also eliminated a sergeant and background investigator position at the time. The city said that currently, vacancies are not being held open and there are no restrictions on hiring at this time.

Next, Tacoma Safe also urges the city to "immediately provide police with the resources and effective strategies necessary to enforce the law, address the long response times, and lower crime rates." The way to do that, Connelly said, is through financial support, added training, and "equipment that builds credibility," like dash cameras and body cameras. Tacoma spent about \$1.2 million this year to implement body cameras and plans to spend \$2 million to implement dash cameras.

"We also need to clarify the law," Connelly said, referring to bills passed by the state Legislature in 2021. "Right now the police are dealing with too many ambiguities which are handcuffing their ability to respond and causing too much confusion." One bill restricts when law enforcement can use deadly force, saying officers may only resort to physical force when there's probable cause to make an arrest, prevent an escape or protect against an imminent threat of harm. The other bill bars officers from using neck restraints and chokeholds, no-knock

warrants and unleashed police dogs. Local law enforcement leaders have previously voiced their concerns about the laws. Steven Strachan, executive director of Washington Association of Sheriffs & Police Chiefs, said in a statement in July that the laws could lead to “unintended outcomes that result in increased levels of confusion, frustration, victimization, and increased crime within our communities.”

Finally, Tacoma Safe demands the city expedite the recruiting and hiring processes for police. Tacoma City Council members have discussed with city staff the difficulties of recruiting people to become police officers, including lengths of time from applying to finding a spot in the Basic Law Enforcement Academy (BLEA), Washington’s mandated training academy for all city and county entry-level police officers. The BLEA only has room for a certain number of recruits for classes.

Tacoma City Council member Robert Thoms told The News Tribune on Thursday that he and fellow Council member Lillian Hunter are working on the South Sound 911 board to “get to the bottom” of the response delays. He said he wants to seek additional funding within the budget to hire more officers or better deploy them if the delay is caused by staffing levels. Thoms added that the City Council is exploring the idea of a local police training program to help expedite the pipeline of public safety staff, which would require approval from the state Legislature. “If we have a training program here in Tacoma, we can better control time frames and equity of process,” Thoms said. **“We have the will of citizens to transform and that clearly means lower response times, better policing tactics and I believe we just need to have a force size that allows for greater results and safety for those in uniform and the citizens they serve.”**

The Tacoma Safe group also wants the city to re-institute the ban on camping on public property, which sun-setted in 2019, and provide “safe camping” sites in combination with mental health and substance abuse services. City Council brought forward a new ban earlier this year, but tabled the ordinance to work with the Tacoma-Pierce County Coalition to End Homelessness, which has been vocally against the city clearing encampments. Homeless advocates have previously said that a camping ban should not be brought back into Tacoma unless there are available and accessible shelter beds for anyone who wants one. Without a low-barrier shelter, they’ve argued that Tacoma isn’t there yet.

Tacoma Mayor Victoria Woodards told The News Tribune on Monday the city is looking into the demands the Tacoma Safe group has made. She said she hears and understands the concerns from people who feel affected by crime. The co-founders of the Tacoma Safe group say they want to work collaboratively with the community and city government. That includes the city’s police reform efforts meant to hold law enforcement more accountable. “I think there is an openness right now for this conversation,” Connelly said. “The energy that’s around us in this community is so palpable that it cannot be ignored. I have such great hope for Tacoma.”

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