

Seattle facing rift between police and politicians over jump in crime, open pot smoking

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Whether it's commercial airplanes, coffee or computers, Seattle has long been a city known for being ahead of the curve. But now, a range of issues – including a jump in serious downtown crime and open pot smoking – are threatening to open a rift between police and politicians that could damage the city's image.

"We were getting more and more comments from people who are working downtown, owning a business, living downtown or visiting, that they just weren't feeling comfortable anymore," says Kate Joncas, Executive Director of the Downtown Seattle Association.

Joncas wrote a letter to the city council saying the level of violence downtown was unacceptable and was putting Seattle's economy at risk.

One business apparently not hurting is marijuana sales. But while recreational pot is now legal statewide, it is still against the law to smoke it in public.

Minors are barred from lighting up anywhere. But whether at the annual hempfest event or on the streets downtown, it remains a law that is largely ignored by both public and police.

Meantime, violent crime in the downtown business district jumped. Among the highest profile crimes were the fatal stabbing of a soccer fan by a homeless man and a city bus shooting that left the driver injured and shooter dead.

At the same time, Seattle police have been accused of de-policing. Recently City Attorney Pete Holmes levied the charge, saying there was evidence officers were no longer dealing with nuisance crimes like urinating in public and open drug use.

But officers have turned the tables, saying Holmes, an ardent supporter of legalizing marijuana, wouldn't prosecute even if they did enforce the laws. Holmes calls that a cop out.

"If you ever hear an officer saying, 'I'm not going to (enforce the law) because of x, y and z,' I don't care what the reason is, recognize that you got an admission that they're not doing their job."

Holmes acknowledges the city asks a lot of the officers. Under the mayor's Center City Initiative, police are required to direct many of the poor and mentally unstable offenders into social services before arresting them for their crimes.

Complicating the issue is the fact that the Department of Justice found the Seattle Police Department frequently violated civil rights by engaging in a pattern of excessive force.

The city entered into a consent decree and is now under the watch of a federal monitor. In his preliminary report, police reformer Merrick Bobb said there was significant resistance to his oversight and troubling rumors of de-policing among the rank and file officers.

But interim Police Chief Jim Pugel denies his cops are turning a blind eye. Yet, he also argues his officers' hands are frequently tied by City Hall.

"We do have somewhat of a fickle group of folks that we serve," says Pugel, "They want order, they want a crime-free area, but they want it done in a particular, what we call the Seattle way."

Seattle officers are not allowed to speak with reporters on the record, but several told Fox News off camera that while there's not an organized effort to de-police, cops are less willing to enforce the so-called quality of life crimes, saying elected leaders, including the city attorney, don't have their back.