

# COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

**Report summarizing community feedback on  
police services and leadership in Burien**



*Town Hall for Youth Engagement and Community Safety. Photo credit: Aaron Wells.*

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# INTRODUCTION

According to Sir Robert Peel, the basic mission of police is to prevent crime and disorder and that the ability to perform their duties is dependent on community approval of police actions. Peel states that the relationship with the community should be that “the police are the public and the public are the police.” Academic research over the last 30 years has repeatedly confirmed that police effectiveness in addressing criminal behavior requires both trust in police and a belief in the legitimacy of their actions. The chief of police is a critical leadership position in any city and the individual in that position must have the trust and respect of the community.

After serving Burien for 14 years, Scott Kimerer retired from the position of chief of police in September 2017. Even though the City of Burien contracts with the King County Sheriff’s Office (KCSO) for police services, the task of selecting a new chief falls on the city manager. City Manager Brian Wilson, appointed by the Burien City Council, was responsible for selecting a new chief from a set of five candidates selected by King County Sheriff Mitzi Johanknecht.

With this important change in leadership, it was an opportunity for the City to hear from residents on how police services can best serve the Burien community. City staff organized a series of public meetings throughout the city, as well as an online survey, to gather community feedback.

Instead of the traditional town hall format, with people coming up to a microphone, participants were asked to join a table, whether it was at a coffee shop or at the Burien Community Center, and walk through a series of questions together. Ground rules helped encourage respectful communication. Facilitators from the community helped facilitate and scribe each table’s conversation. People stood up and presented a summary of the discussion to the entire group. This format generated collaborative communication, and helped residents forge new connections.

At the final community meeting, residents had a chance to meet all the chief of police candidates at once. Attendees proposed their own questions and heard answers directly from the candidates. This approach allowed residents to ask questions that mattered to them instead of questions dictated by City staff.

City staff made efforts to make the meetings accessible including translating materials into Spanish and Vietnamese, and offering interpretation and childcare.

Overall, through both the survey and the community meetings, approximately 400 people engaged in the process. Community feedback influenced the design of the questions used in the candidate interviews, as well as the criteria used to evaluate each candidate.

## MEETING TIMES AND LOCATIONS

Community Meetings	
Burien Community Center	March 21
Woodridge Park Apartments	April 5
Coffee with the City Manager	
Grand Central Bakery	March 22
Salmon Creek Café	March 27
Tikal Bakery	March 30
Meet the Candidates	
Burien Community Center	April 12

# SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY FEEDBACK ABOUT POLICE SERVICES AND LEADERSHIP

During the community conversations, residents participated in a discussion based on the following five questions.

## **Question 1: How do you hope the Burien Police Department will meet the needs of your neighborhood and community?**

More active communications and community engagement was a common theme across all demographics and neighborhoods. The phrase “don’t be a stranger” was repeated at several meetings. Residents were looking for engagement “from the top down,” meaning they want to see their chief just as connected to the community as individual officers.

Trust and the need to build more trust between police and the community was also a common theme. Residents offered many ideas on how to build trust—from looking at the way police interact with residents to showing up when it is not an emergency, like at block parties and community festivals. Police were asked to “meet people where they are” and better embed themselves in the community. Residents wanted the familiarity of a small town police department that can still address the needs of a complex, urban community.

Residents want to see police receive trainings on implicit bias, racial equity, de-escalation, and mental health assessment and intervention as a way to help police officers better communicate and help the diverse communities in Burien. Stories were shared of youth not feeling comfortable approaching school resource officers. It was suggested that officers hired for that position should be able to connect with young people. Others shared that they felt profiled. Police were asked to actively listen before jumping to solutions.

Some residents said they want to see a police department that is globally minded, but that puts Burien first. There was a call for more active collaboration between mental health and behavioral health providers and police. They also wanted to see more emphasis on neighborhoods that have higher perceived needs.

## **Question 2: What changes do you hope to see in the Burien Police Department?**

Overall, there was a concern that many officers communicated to residents that they didn’t have the power to affect a situation, saying “there is nothing we can do.” Residents wanted to see better enforcement and follow through, especially on property crimes, graffiti and tagging, drug dealing, and other non-violent crimes. More foot patrols and more proactive policing, with officers leaving their vehicles, was mentioned as a high priority. There were calls to bring back the “gang unit” and other special resources to address specific crime trends in Burien.

There was a call to drastically improve the racial, gender, and language diversity within the police force to better reflect the diversity of Burien. To help improve trust and relationship-building, some recommended efforts to keep more officers in Burien for a longer period, decreasing the high turnover of staff in the department. Residents also wanted a more inviting police department building. Some encouraged the police department to bring back the neighborhood storefront.

The protection of youth from violent crime was a topic at many of the meetings. Police were asked to remove barriers for youth involvement. Residents also stated that police can't do it alone and that it takes involvement from schools, the City, parents, and local businesses to solve these issues.

People also called for more real-time communications, including a more consistent presence on social media. Local media and social media groups were listed as ways people stay informed and that the police should more proactively communicate using these channels.

### **Question 3: What should be the top priorities of the Burien Police Department?**

Understanding that there are always limits on the number of people and resources the police department has, residents listed what they thought the top priorities should be for the police department and the new chief of police.

- Know the community, enhance community engagement, and build trust through more effective community policing strategies
- Improve real-time communications with the public, especially when incidents are occurring (such as Sylvester Middle School lock down)
- Work with the school district to address youth violence
- Bring back the "gang unit" with a presence and enforcement
- Prioritize the law and consequences
- Address high volume crimes, like domestic violence, mail theft, and car theft
- Assist the school district with school safety measures, such as metal detectors
- Train police officers in relationship building, de-escalation, self-awareness, and self-management
- Build a culturally competent, diverse police force that reflects the diversity of the community
- Work with human services partners and agencies to address socioeconomic issues that could be leading to crime
- Focus on drug dealers and an increase drug crime
- Address crimes that result from homelessness, sleeping in cars, vagrancy
- Require officers to carry less lethal equipment and know how to use it well

### **Question 4: What personal qualities do you think are most important for the leader of the Burien Police Department?**

Residents recognize that Burien is experiencing significant changes, and that the new police chief needs to be able to lead through the change. People stated that the police chief needed to be a forward thinker, and bring lots of energy for the community and policing. They wanted someone who has a positive approach to problem solving. At the same time, they want someone who can treat people equally and be pleasant and respectful to residents while still holding people accountable for criminal behavior.

Residents want someone who is able to engage the community, be an active listener, and build relationships. The new chief is encouraged to be involved in the community. Specific



characteristics were called out as important: intercultural competence, empathetic, trustworthy, transparent, creative, teachable, and willing to learn. The chief should be a bridge and use the community to help protect public safety. The police chief should be a model for the officers, and inspire and empower them to achieve higher standards.

The chief should embrace diversity and be willing to be uncomfortable in communities where there is tension. The new chief should also understand the intersection between poverty, youth taking on adult responsibilities, housing, food insecurity, employment needs and crime. The new chief should be an advocate for more effective collaboration between the police and social services.

Residents want a leader who can take the moral high ground and withstand political pressure. Residents said the chief should be bold and the public face of the police department. They also want someone who understands Burien, its history and the people who live here now, and that will be in the community for a long time.

**Question 5: Is there anything else you would like the City of Burien to consider regarding police services and/or the selection of a new Police Chief?**

There were a wide variety of responses to this question, but many of them centered on how to better engage the community. An overall theme was the desire for the police to develop a constructive and consistent approach for the community to engage with police on issues that affect their communities. Regarding community engagement, residents made the following suggestions:

- **Be consistent** in how police engage with and hear from the community
- **Examine barriers to engagement with existing programs.** For example, there is discomfort in some communities with the term block “watch”—one recommendation for a new name was “Neighbor to Neighbor.” Participants recommended looking at the program through the lens of communities who have not participated in the past
- **Show up**—both during crises and when it is not an emergency
- **Invest in existing programs.** For example, have Burien officers attend the Burien Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services Teen Late Night program instead of Metro Transit officers
- **Be intentional about building relationships with community organizations** who already have relationships with communities and understand root issues and causes of criminal behavior
- **Show the face of the department** through regular updates in Burien Magazine and more robust social media presence
- **Host open houses and promote block parties** as a way to build community
- **Invite residents to help**, such as citizen patrol or through other programs

Some of the suggestions were focused on programs non-law enforcement staff could address, such as neighborhood grant programs. City staff were also encouraged to develop programs at Alturas Apartments. Other suggestions included placing sub-stations, or neighborhood storefronts, in specific neighborhoods—Boulevard Park and Maverick Apartments were named as potential locations. Residents felt newcomers to the community could be better welcomed through community potlucks and concerts in backyards.

Both police and staff were encouraged to develop cross-age programs that both alleviates fear from the elderly and strengthens the ties between youth, elderly, and police. Police were asked to invest in recruitment of support staff and officers from underrepresented communities.

Residents also wanted to see police address chronic issues with tagging, especially as a means to address gang issues. More police presence was mentioned, including the use of bicycles in warmer months. There were suggestions to look at Burien having its own police services separate from KCSO. Programs such as LEAD that divert misdemeanor offenders into services were mentioned as being important.

## OUTCOME OF POLICE CHIEF ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Wilson announced the selection of Theodore 'Ted' Boe to be the next police chief on April 17, 2018. Chief Boe's first day was on May 1, 2018. Chief Boe has 18 years of experience with the King County Sheriff's Office. Chief Boe has already begun the work of responding to feedback shared during the community engagement process. Some of his early accomplishments include:

- Focusing and strengthening the partnership between the Burien Police Department's High Visibility Team and the City of Burien Human Services staff to form a Navigation Team that helps get people experiencing homelessness into services
- Increased communications about the police department in order to build better relationships. This includes: introducing new employees at city council meetings, countless cups of coffee with individual community members and groups to both listen and learn, and more activity on social media
- Increased bicycle patrol in parks and downtown areas
- Participating in community events: Chief and Captain walked 4th of July Parade, officers and Chief were present at a Farmers Market booth, Father's Day Car show, Great Day of Play, National Night Out, and other community events
- Hosting "Coffee with a Cop" events in September and October
- Graduated first class of 19 youth in the new Teen Police Academy
- Chief Boe participated in mayor's youth violence meeting at Sylvester Middle School, a leadership class and team project presentations at Highline High School, and taught leadership at the Washington Law Enforcement Explorer Academy
- Chief Boe published a [statement about the Burien Police Department and King County's position on cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement \(ICE\)](#)

# TOWN HALL: YOUTH ENGAGEMENT & COMMUNITY SAFETY

On March 28, 2018, two young women lost their lives in a shooting at the 13700 block of Ambaum Blvd SW. In response, Council asked for an emergency town hall meeting. Staff worked quickly to bring together Councilmembers and the community to convene a public conversation about how to prevent future violence in our community. The outcome of the town hall was Council direction to address youth violence through a task force. On August 6, 2018, Council voted to fold the task force into a larger strategy to focus on protective factors for families.

View a video of the Town Hall: <http://burien.vod.castus.tv/vod/?video=55714fc0-ec87-4d5f-bd64-69a0d5b9e720>

## SUMMARY OF COMMUNITY FEEDBACK ABOUT YOUTH VIOLENCE

A number of themes emerged during the town hall discussion from providing more support for families and youth to working with community leaders and the local school district to making positive changes in the community. Some of the specific recommendations included:

- Highline School District campuses should work together to help identify and support kids that don't have the option or ability to interact well with their parents
- Alturas Apartments and other apartment complexes could include outdoor spaces, such as courts, gardens, or other recreational amenities to help residents decompress and enjoy green space
- Provide childcare at Alturas Apartments and bring back the New Futures program onsite to support families
- Establish more services within the Burien Community Center that focus on youth and teens
- Improve marketing of service and recreation programs for youth and teens
- Help provide transportation for kids to and from programs
- Establish a Youth Council or some forum so that youth and teens have a way to better connect with staff and to City Council
- Highline School District could better promote programs and other social support options at school. For example, make announcements daily during the morning session rather than late in the afternoon. Share flyers from other service providers. Invite other service providers to the campus to speak at a "current event" session or time set aside to hear about what is happening in the community
- Provide employment and community service for youth through partnerships with local businesses
- More incentives to attend school, such as high quality teachers and sports
- Kids need more support dealing with substance abuse, gangs, and guns. This includes making it harder for kids to access guns
- Develop community leaders that are out in the neighborhoods and more connected with our



diverse community. Help connect better and identify resources with kids and their families to support their challenges

- Collaborate and with Seattle on programs/resources dealing with social challenges.
- Positive change will take a lot of time and commitment from all in the community and will require changes in the mindsets of many
- Make the streets safe for kids to be out after dark
- Funding and support comes from economic development

## YOUTH PROGRAMS IN BURIED

There are a number of existing programs and support services available to youth and teens.

**Parks and Recreation programs:**

[https://burienwa.gov/residents/parks\\_recreation\\_cultural\\_services/programs\\_services/](https://burienwa.gov/residents/parks_recreation_cultural_services/programs_services/)

**Programs that receive City of Burien Human Services Funding**

[https://burienwa.gov/residents/resident\\_resources/human\\_services](https://burienwa.gov/residents/resident_resources/human_services)

**Highline School District Student Support Services**

<https://www.highlineschools.org/departments/student-support>

## HOW TO STAY ENGAGED

There are many ways to stay engaged and learn more about how your police department works.

### Community Police Academy

The Community Police Academy is designed to increase understanding between residents and their police departments through public education. The program is free for anyone who lives or works in Burien or SeaTac.

The Academy spans 12 weeks and participants learn about a wide range of topics, including:

- History of the department
- School Resource Officers (SROs)
- Hiring and recruitment
- Major accident response and reconstruction
- Early intervention and crime prevention
- Overview of major crimes, street crimes, and gangs
- Firearms training and bomb disposal
- Tours of communications center and SCORE jail
- Use of force
- Overview of police explorer program, volunteer opportunities, and reserves
- K-9 unit
- Patrol procedures

Classes are held on Thursday nights from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. To apply, please fill out an application. Learn more at: [https://burienwa.gov/residents/public\\_safety/police/community\\_police\\_academy/](https://burienwa.gov/residents/public_safety/police/community_police_academy/).

## Neighborhood Block Watch

Neighborhood Block Watch is a neighborhood-based crime prevention program designed to reduce crime and the fear of crime in residential areas. Burien Police can help you start a block watch in your neighborhood.

Block watches build a sense of community, prevent crime, and connect neighbors. Block watch is a prime example of neighbors watching out for each other's interests. This takes little time and no money. An active block watch program can significantly reduce incidents of residential burglary.

Block watch organizes and extends what you are probably already doing on an informal basis. The key is getting to know your neighbors. Block Watches are encouraged to get together at least one time each year.

Burien Police provide information to block watch members on home security and will provide a free home security survey.

Learn more at:

[https://burienwa.gov/residents/public\\_safety/police/neighborhood\\_safety/neighborhood\\_block\\_watch/](https://burienwa.gov/residents/public_safety/police/neighborhood_safety/neighborhood_block_watch/)

## National Night Out

National Night Out strengthens neighbor-to-neighbor connections and police-community partnerships. Held on the first Tuesday in August, this annual event brings together communities across the nation, and involves residents, law enforcement agencies, civic groups, businesses, neighborhood organizations, and local officials. Every year, more than 25 National Night Out block parties are held in Burien.

Whether this is already a long-standing tradition on your block, or if you have been thinking about getting to know your neighbors, please participate this year.

Learn more at:

[https://burienwa.gov/residents/public\\_safety/police/neighborhood\\_safety/national\\_night\\_out/](https://burienwa.gov/residents/public_safety/police/neighborhood_safety/national_night_out/)

Other thoughts on how you would like to be involved? Contact [theodore.boe@kingcounty.gov](mailto:theodore.boe@kingcounty.gov)