

Memorandum

TO: Economic Transformation and Stabilization, and Workforce Development
Advisory Commission

FROM: Attorney General Knudsen, Budget Director Ryan Osmundson, Director
Osterman

DATE: October 27, 2021

SUBJECT: Addressing Significant Violent Crime Increase to Economically Stabilize Billings

Overview: Billings is experiencing economic instability related to an increase in COVID-related crime, including violent crime. More prosecutors and criminal defense attorneys are needed to reduce the number of unfiled cases and case backlogs, and more law enforcement is needed on the streets to address the crime increase and enhance economic stability. The state proposes to dedicate resources to the issue for state expenses in collaboration with both the City of Billings and Yellowstone County dedicating resources at the local level.

Violent crime has significantly increased as a result of the pandemic. Project Safe Neighborhoods data gathered from the Billings Police Department (BPD) shows that after a few early static months at the start of COVID, beginning in June 2020 through August 2021, violent crime reported by the BPD increased almost 40 percent when compared with the previous 12 months. For example, Partner or Family Member Assault charges increased 48% from 2019 to 2020 to 114 cases, and Strangulation charges increased 35% from 2019 to 2020 to 142 cases.

Crime, including violent crime, has increased as a result of the pandemic, in part because court backlogs have resulted in criminal defendants being in pretrial or pre-revocation hearing status longer, resulting in more defendants being released pretrial or pre-revocation hearing because of jail occupancy limits and because defendants are released into the community for a longer time. In addition, in part because of COVID-related recruitment and retention issues, and because of the need to focus on case backlogs at the Yellowstone County Attorney's Office (YCAO), more suspects remain uncharged in the community.

Per data from the Montana Supreme Court, the on-time case processing rate for District 13 which includes Yellowstone County fell from 73% in 2019 to 72% in 2020 to 66% in 2021. In addition, the criminal case clearance rate for District 13 fell from 122.5% for the twelve months ending March 31, 2020 to 103.25% for the next twelve months after COVID began, and the abuse and neglect case clearance rate fell from 130.5% to 90.5%. Per data from the Office of the Public Defender (OPD), working cases open in OPD Region 9, which includes Yellowstone County, increased from 7,789 in mid-2020 to 9,687 in mid-2021. In 2020, information from the YCAO shows that it brought charges against 1,722 defendants, a 13.8% increase over 2019. Charges in 2021 are on pace to go down, however, the number of unfiled cases has increased.

Information from the Yellowstone County Sheriff's Office shows that before and after the onset of COVID, except for a brief period in 2020 when the district judges ordered a COVID-related release of prisoners, the jail population in Yellowstone County has remained fairly constant. However, because there are more defendants awaiting trial or revocation hearing, and because

there are more uncharged suspects, there are more criminal suspects and defendants on the streets in Billings.

Those who have already committed a crime are more likely to commit another crime. A 2017 Study by the U. S. Sentencing Commission showed that there is a 34 percent to 80 percent chance that a person who has committed at least one crime will be rearrested for another crime, depending on the number, recency and severity of previous crime(s) committed. For example, information from the YCAO shows that in Yellowstone County, during June through August of 2020 (in the early stages of COVID), 99 suspects for new crimes, with at least 159 charged but unresolved previous crimes or supervision violations, were presented by law enforcement to the YCAO for prosecution. During June through August of 2021, however, after the COVID-related case backlog had increased, 147 suspects for new crimes released pending trial or revocation hearing for at least one prior crime or supervision violation, were presented to the YCAO for prosecution. That is almost a 49 percent increase over the same period in 2020. Those suspects were pending trial or revocation hearing on at least 276 prior crimes or violations, which is an increase of almost 74 percent over the same period in 2020.

The increase in crime, including violent crime, has caused economic de-stabilization in Billings. A National Police Services Survey between October 19, 2020 and December 2, 2020 reported that only 31% of 3,000 households in Billings felt safe in downtown Billings at night compared to 74% who felt safe in their neighborhood at night. In a Billings Chamber of Commerce survey between April 27, 2021 and May 13, 2021, 89% of businesses responded that their business was impacted by public safety issues and concerns, and 53% were impacted moderately or greatly.

As outlined in the attached letters, Billings businessowners have been adversely impacted by the surge in crime and violence. For example, Mike Nelson, General Manager of the Northern Hotel, notes that necessary private security has resulted in “extra expense through our Downtown Association”; that “in our nearly nine years we have had employees robbed, beaten, and even sexually assaulted on their way to work”; and that related employee turnover “is a major expense, one which depending on the position can [cost] tens of thousands of dollars.”

Allocation Request and Deadlines: \$1,500,000 to the OPD and \$815,000 to the Montana Department of Justice from the amount appropriated under Section 12 of HB 632, to be obligated by December 31, 2024 and spent by December 31, 2026.

Structure: The OPD will use the funds to hire public defenders and contract defense attorneys to help address the case backlog in Yellowstone County. OPD will address backlogs in misdemeanor cases by hiring contract defense attorneys, while addressing backlogs associated with felonies and abuse and neglect cases through the freed up and newly employed public defenders.

The Department of Justice will use the funds to hire three new agents in the Division of Criminal Investigation to help address drugs and violent crime in Yellowstone County.

In addition, Yellowstone County will use \$1M of local funds to help address these problems from the county perspective. The City of Billings will also use \$1M local funds to help address these problems from the city perspective.

Eligibility: The Department of Justice and OPD will be the recipient of these funds for the purposes set forth in this project proposal. The Office of Budget and Program Planning plans to seek review and comment from the Legislative Finance Committee to categorize the funding as “revenue replacement funds” and the provision of services under this proposal fit under the eligibility category of “provision of government services.” The Departments of Justice and Commerce, the OPD, and the Office of Budget and Program Planning certify that this program is an eligible use under the American Rescue Plan Act and all applicable guidance.

Application and Verification: On approval of this program proposal, the Office of Budget and Program Planning will make these funds available to the Department of Justice and OPD in annual amounts to total the amount set forth for each agency in this program proposal for funds spent or obligated through December 31, 2024.

Equity: American Indians and Alaska Natives have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic-related surge in crime. Despite American Indians and Alaska Natives comprising approximately 4.9 percent of Yellowstone County’s population, they accounted for 21 percent of crime victims in 2019; 20 percent of victims in 2020; and 20 percent of victims as of September 30, 2021, according to data provided by the BPD. Data provided by BPD also demonstrates that crime against American Indians and Alaska Natives increased by 37 percent between 2019 and 2020 and is on track to meet or exceed this percentage increase for 2021. Crime suspects are also disproportionately American Indian or Alaska Native, as evidenced by BPD data that demonstrates this population constituted 39 percent of charges in 2020.

Performance Metrics: The Department of Justice will report the violent crime rate annually in Billings from data tracked by the BPD. The OPD will track criminal felony, abuse and neglect, and criminal misdemeanor backlogs over the period these funds are allocated.

Recommendation:

Allocate \$1,500,000 to OPD to hire employee or contract defense attorneys to address cases in Yellowstone County. Allocate \$815,000 to the Montana Department of Justice to hire criminal agents to help address drug and violent crime in Yellowstone County. Both allocations of state fiscal recovery funds are recommended to be allocated from the amount appropriated under Section 12 of HB 632. The allocation of funds to the Department of Justice is contingent on the documented commitment of \$1 million of additional criminal justice local funding by the City of Billings and on the documented commitment of \$1 million additional criminal justice local funding by Yellowstone County.

RESOLUTION 21-11014

**A RESOLUTION OF INTENT TO COMMIT FUNDS DIRECTED TO A
PUBLIC SAFETY PLAN IN CONCERT WITH YELLOWSTONE COUNTY
AND THE STATE OF MONTANA TO ADDRESS VIOLENT CRIME IN
BILLINGS, YELLOWSTONE COUNTY, MONTANA**

WHEREAS, violent crime in Billings has increased by over 70% during the COVID-19 pandemic in both 2020 and 2021; and,

WHEREAS, the Courts are experiencing backlogs due to this increased crime and due to COVID-19 related processes; and,

WHEREAS, these court backlogs have resulted in criminal defendants remaining in pretrial or pre-revocation hearing status longer, resulting in more criminal defendants being released pretrial or pre-revocation hearing because of jail occupancy limits and because defendants are released into the community for a longer time.

WHEREAS, the National Police Services Survey conducted between October 2020 and December 2020 indicates that only 31% of 3000 households in Billings felt safe in downtown Billings at night compared to 74% who felt safe in their neighborhood at night; and,

WHEREAS, a Billings Chamber of Commerce survey between April 2021 and May 2021 indicates that 89% of businesses responded that their business was impacted by public safety issues and concerns and 53% were impacted moderately or greatly; and,

WHEREAS, Billings is experiencing economic instability related to an increase in COVID-19 related crime, including violent crime; and,

WHEREAS, more law enforcement is needed to address the crime increase and more prosecutors and more criminal defense attorneys are needed to reduce case backlogs; and,

WHEREAS, considering these challenges, the State of Montana has indicated a willingness to aid Billings and Yellowstone County by dedicating up to \$2 million of its ARPA funds for the next three years to address pandemic-related issues resulting in increased crime, court backlogs, and extended pre-trial or pre-revocation hearing status of defendants; and,

WHEREAS, the Billings City Council intends to work cooperatively with the State of Montana and Yellowstone County to address these issues by committing an additional \$1 million to fund resources for law enforcement and prosecution services over the next three years.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF BILLINGS, MONTANA:

The City Council intends to dedicate an additional \$1 million to fund resources for law enforcement and prosecution services over the next three years starting January 1, 2022, in coordination with Yellowstone County dedicating an additional \$1 million and the State dedicating \$2 million of its ARPA funds to temporarily provide for supplemental resources within the criminal justice systems of the City of Billings and Yellowstone County.

APPROVED AND PASSED by the Billings City Council this 25th day of October, 2021.

CITY OF BILLINGS



By: William A. Cole
William A. Cole, Mayor

ATTEST:

By: Denise P. Bohlman
Denise Bohlman, City Clerk

City Council Work Session

Date: 10/18/2021
Title: Violent Crime Reduction Partnership
Presented by: Chris Kukulski, City Administrator
Department: Finance
Presentation: Yes

RECOMMENDATION

During the October 25 City Council meeting the Council will be asked to adopt a resolution of intention to partner with Yellowstone County and the State of Montana to invest funds locally to combat increases in violent crime in our community. The work session this evening will provide City Council with an update on the potential program and the desired outcomes of this partnership.

BACKGROUND (Consistency with Adopted Plans and Policies, if applicable)

Attorney General Knudsen and former Budget Director Kurt Alme's offices recently met with representatives from the City and County to positively impact the surge in violent crime in Billings. This goal will be accomplished by freeing up space in the jail to house criminals and to fight violent crimes tied to drugs and domestic violence. The idea is to have each of the three entities commit to increasing resources to accomplish these priorities. We have discussed a partnership investing a total of \$4,000,000 to assist victims and hold criminals accountable to reduce violent crime in Billings over the next three years. Yellowstone County and the City will each commit \$1,000,000 of investment to match \$2,000,000 from the State over the next three years. This program is being implemented with one-time money, and the commitment is expected to end after three years. The State will be making their request to a legislative sub-committee in late October. We believe it is beneficial to make our local commitment prior to the October 27 hearing.

The City is coordinating with the Attorney General and Governor's offices, Yellowstone County Attorney Twito, Sheriff Linder and the County Commissioners to prioritize freeing up jail space and preventing and prosecuting violent crimes connected to drug and domestic violence with these one-time additional resources. We plan to create teams of city, county and state personnel to collaboratively address these two key areas of violent crime. The City can accomplish its commitment by adding one (1) major case agent, one (1) prosecutor and one (1) victim witness specialist for an estimated cost of approx. \$1.14M over three years. In addition to the areas identified above, the State will increase its capacity to provide public defenders so that criminal cases can be adjudicated through the criminal justice system. This last step is critical to freeing up space at the jail.

The City's resolution of intention, as well as support from the County will be presented along with the State's funding request to the legislative ARPA Commission on 10/27/2021. If approved by the commission and the Governor, the State, County, and City will begin implementing investments to reduce violent crime in our community as soon as possible.

ALTERNATIVES

No Council decision will be made at this meeting. Council will be asked at the regular City Council Meeting on 10/25/2021 to approve a resolution of intention to support this investment of funds

FISCAL EFFECTS

The anticipated costs to the City of Billings over the next 3 years is approximately \$1.14M. If voters approve the 2021 Public Safety Mill Levy, much of the additional resources identified in that levy will be used to kickstart this program and no new funding will be needed, as the goals are identical.

If the levy is not approved, City staff will ask City Council to use either ARPA funds or cash reserves to fund this program for 3 years.

Fiscal Year	2nd half 2022	2023	2024	1st half 2025	Total
Major Case Agent (Detective)	55,976	115,311	118,770	61,166	351,223
Prosecutor	67,065	138,153	142,297	73,283	420,798
Victim Witness Specialist	46,209	95,191	98,046	50,494	289,940
Total Salary & Benefit Costs	169,250	348,654	359,114	184,943	1,061,961
O&M	12,895	22,000	22,000	22,000	78,895
Total Costs	\$ 182,145	\$ 370,654	\$ 381,114	\$ 206,943	\$ 1,140,856

Attachments

DRAFT Resolution

Yellowstone County



COMMISSIONERS
(406) 256-2701
(406) 256-2777 (FAX)

P.O. Box 35000
Billings, MT 59107-5000
bocc@yellowstonecountymt.gov

October 26, 2021

Economic Transformation and Stabilization and Workforce Advisory Commission

RE: Address backlog of violent crime and stress on local criminal justice system to help economically stabilize Billings community

Dear Advisory Committee:

The Yellowstone County Board of Commissioners is aware of the instability our community faces due to an increase in crime including violent drug crime. Prosecuting this crime within the local criminal justice system has been further complicated by delays in case resolution timeframes directly created by the COVID pandemic. There are several examples of this, but what stands out is that felony cases are taking longer to prosecute and work through the court system putting immense pressure on the local detention facility, the district court, the prosecutors, and defense attorneys.

To combat this instability that has been exacerbated by COVID, Yellowstone County will commit approximately \$1 million of its ARPA Local Financial Recovery Funds over the next three years. These funds will be used for two violent crime prosecutors focused on violent felony domestic and drug related crimes occurring within the City of Billings, Yellowstone County. Additionally,

these funds will be used to hire two paralegals that will be tasked with instituting and expediting the processing of criminal charges. These paralegal positions will work jointly with the Billings City Attorney's Office to focus and assist on the processing and prosecuting of violent offenses committed in the Downtown Billings corridor.

Specifically, the Yellowstone County Commission will provide the Yellowstone County Attorney's Office the following for three years:

2 prosecutors (salary & benefits): \$608,422

2 paralegals (salary & benefits): \$398,435

Total (3 years): \$1,006,857

Yellowstone County and its partners, the State of Montana, and the City of Billings, are committed to fighting the current economic instability in our community brought on by COVID related issues specifically related to an increase in violent crime. We hope that the Workforce Advisory Commission will allow us to address this very difficult issue.

Sincerely,

Yellowstone County Board of Commissioners

Donald W. Jones, Chairman

John Ostlund, Commissioner

Denis Pitman, Commissioner



Billings Industrial Revitalization District

1413 4th ave. N, Billings, MT. 59101

www.billingsbird.com

406-272-4321

Senator Mark Blasdel
Chair, Economic Transformation and Stabilization and Workforce Advisory Commission
PO Box 1493
Kalispell, MT 59903

Dear Senator Mark Blasdel,

I was asked to write a letter in representation of the business and property owners in the East Billings Urban Renewal District. This neighborhood has been a historical economic engine for the City of Billings and therefore the state of Montana for decades. We have legacy business that are being passed to 2nd generation ownership and flagship stores for well-known Montana companies such as Shipton's Big R and Western Ranch Supply. This district employs thousands of people from Yellowstone County has a diversity of business including automotive, recycling, manufacturing, agriculture, and home services.

Property damage, theft, vandalism and violent crime in this neighborhood has stretched the resources of our city recently. The local economy has been taxed as businesses spend resources on additional insurance, measures to curb crime, and replacement of staff who are fed up with situations such as being accosted when returning to their cars after working a long day. Needless to say, you walk into any of these local businesses, and they continue to operate and produce necessary goods for the local and surrounding communities.

The City of Billings must turn the corner on addressing violent crime in this community. A few months ago, a group of local property owners banded together to purchase and demolish the Lazy KT Motel. This location was a top crime center in our city for years. One of the participating property owners was on the verge of losing a tenant who leased 30,000 square feet because of his building receiving consistent damage from bullets from incidents at the Lazy KT. The same owner, who has invested in an extensive video security system, had another tenant attacked during a walk back to his vehicle after-hours a few weeks ago. Four blocks away, Shipton's Big R has its original store. In July, Shipton's had a break-in where thousands of dollars of merchandise, including guns, were stolen.

These challenges are not new to the neighborhood hence the reason it was identified as an area that needed efforts to eliminate blight. But the quantity and intensity of crime has been exacerbated by the economic, mental, and emotional stresses of COVID-19. You look at the Billings Food Bank lines every week in our district and you can see first-hand the incredible need that exists in our communities as vehicles stretch for blocks multiple days a week. We must identify ways to curb crime where there is opportunity, but the city needs more robust response measures so that organized and violent criminals are taken off the streets.

Please accept this letter in representation of the 60+ business and property owners in East Billings. We hope that additional support will help our community to take proactive steps to curb crime in Billings.

Sincerely,

Zack Terakedis
Director
East Billings Urban Renewal District

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Zack Terakedis", is written over the typed name and title.



Billings Industrial Revitalization District

1413 4th ave. N, Billings, MT. 59101

www.billingsbird.com

406-272-4321

East Billings Urban Renewal District Business and Property Owners

Name

Business/Property Address

Matt McDonnell

BSCC 315 N. 15th St.

Brad Warneke

221 N 15th St

David Puhis

Mitchell Appliances 201 N. 15th St.

Kelly O'Connor

1501 2nd Ave N.

Red oak

Matt Weber

1415 1st Ave N.

Martin Cornell

49 N 15th Street #2

Greg Connor

216 N 14th Street

[Signature]

711. 17th St.

Mary Ann Swain

PO Box 31292 Blgs. 59107

[Empty lines for names]

[Empty lines for addresses]



BIG SKY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

EDA • EDC CREATING MONTANA BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

Senator Mark Blasdel
Chair, Economic Transformation & Stabilization and Workforce Development Advisory Commission
1301 East 6th Street
Helena, MT 59601

Dear Senator Blasdel:

Community safety and economic health go hand in hand. In fact, one of the top questions we are asked by prospective companies – outside of property & workforce availability – is, “Is this a safe community?”

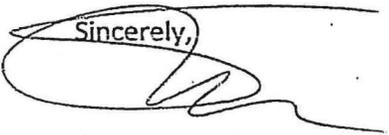
When businesses and individuals alike are looking to move to Billings, they expect that a town of our size in a state of our size will offer them a safe community. It has long been an anecdote that in Montana we don’t lock our doors, and in the winter, you’ll find cars on, unlocked, and running, in the grocery store parking lot. That is quickly becoming a thing of the past in Billings as we face higher and higher crime rates.

To understand the volume of crime, I will use a property we all know, the DoubleTree Hotel (formerly the Sheraton/Crown Plaza) in downtown Billings. In a half mile radius around that property, there were 96 crime incidents in just a seven-day period (October 7th – October 13th). That building is in the heart of our central business district and is just one illustrative example of the prevalence of safety challenges we face throughout our community that have only been exacerbated by Covid-19.

Our State, City, and County are in this public safety challenge together. We are tied together through significant State and local safety, corrections, and judicial infrastructure, and we are tied economically. The Billings metropolitan statistical area represents 22% of the State’s GDP. When Billings does well, so does the state – and the converse is also true. We’re asking for your continued partnership to ensure a strong future and, to do so, we need public safety support.

Your consideration is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,


Steve Arveschoug
Executive Director
Big Sky Economic Development

CC: Scott Osterman, DOC
BSED Board of Directors
Mayor Bill Cole

GRANITE TOWER
212 NORTH 32ND ST. SUITE 200
BILLINGS, MT 59101-1948

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BIGSKYECONOMICDEVELOPMENT.ORG

N O R T H E R N



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H O T E L

October 4, 2021

Senator Mark Blasdel,
Chair, Economic Transformation & Stabilization and Work Force Development Advisory Commission
Post Office Box 1493
Kalispell, MT 59903

Honorable Senator Blasdel,

I have been asked to write you in regard to the problems and expense that arise in operating a business in the heart of Montana's largest city. I own and operate the only four-star business hotel in the state: Northern Hotel. We are located at the intersection of First Avenue and Broadway in downtown Billings. I regard that to be the premier address in town, and hope that my customers do as well.

The Northern has been in business since 1902, and my brother Chris and I have owned the building since 2009. It was closed then, and required an investment of about thirty million dollars to renovate. We have seen success since our reopening in 2013, and hope to celebrate our ninth anniversary this coming March. Although business has been good here, and we are happy to be doing business in our home town, it has not been without challenges and even tragedies that came along with our location.

I am referring to the steady rise in crime in our neighborhood over the last several years. Since opening, we have experienced extra expense through our Downtown Association: the group has added and paid for two extra police officers dedicated to the downtown area. My hotel has added a full time security person along with assistants to secure our late night shift. We have a security service patrol our parking garage, in addition to which we supplement their patrols with our employees. We station employees at the doors after dark to limit access to our building.

Regardless of those actions, we all have become personally familiar with crime, violence and the aftermath of both. We have lost employees to the results of crime: in our nearly nine years we have had employees robbed, beaten and even sexually assaulted on their way to work. These folks have not been able to keep coming back to my hotel – so we have lost good people. In the past eighteen months alone, I have attended two criminal trials of people accused (and convicted) of violent crimes committed on the Northern's personnel. As a matter of fact, I was a victim in one of those trials – that one ended in a prison sentence of ten years.

There are times when the Northern Hotel has high profile visitors. It isn't uncommon for us to host

L I F E S T Y L E

Preferred
HOTELS & RESORTS

19 North Broadway · Billings, MT 59101 · phone 406.867.6767 · fax 406.867.6776 · info@northernhotel.com

—————
NorthernHotel.com

entertainers, politicians, dignitaries, a Supreme Court Justice and two U.S. Vice Presidents. Because of the high incidence of transients around our neighborhood, we will work with the police department here to increase patrols during their stay – nothing could be worse than for a high profile person leaving Montana to tell the world how bad crime is here. We've been lucky so far, at least to a certain extent.

Take a look at a recent trend in reviews of the Northern:

"NOT SAFE. Do not stay here if you have anything valuable in your car. My car was broken into in their parking garage..." Donna Leibelt, Google Review

"...drunks and beggars near the entrance... the hotel should have a continental breakfast minimum and security so the drunks don't accost the guests for a cigarette." Slide Out Shelves LLC, Google Review

Both of these reviews can be seen on Google. I'm pretty sure that the Northern is not the only business in Billings to have these things mentioned in social media.

What I am getting to here, Senator, is that there is a large cost to doing business in Billings. The employees that this hotel has lost paid a price, and the hotel has paid a price too. Employee turnover is a major expense, one which depending on the position can be tens of thousands of dollars per job. Additional employees for security, additional funds to help pay for extra police, additional patrols in our parking garage, additional hardware for locks, cameras, additional labor expense for security consciousness training – after a while it adds up to some pretty serious money.

The cost of imprisoning a person in Montana is around \$30,000 per year. The sentences handed out for just the crimes to myself and my employees in the past eighteen months will be over a million dollars. Anecdotally, the city and our citizens are starting to pay a price in reduced visitorship – after all reviews like those above will eventually cause a toll. The State of Montana will also pay a price in lost revenue.

Tourism is a very important industry, and not just to the Northern. The Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research reported that Yellowstone County brought to the state over \$492 million in 2019. The top two things that tourists spend their money on when here are gasoline and hotel rooms – both of those are a large source of tax revenue for Montana.

I have tried to make the argument that there is a personal and an economic cost to crime. Put yourself in the place of a business owner who has to answer this question every day: do I want to earn a living in a business where my employees have to risk their lives? After all, we're just hoteliers, restaurateurs, store-keepers and the like. Put yourself in the place of the person looking for a job. Or, put yourself in the place of the person reading the review above – and asking themselves if they really want to visit our state...

I am sure you have heard that our detention center is overcrowded, and that is true. A large number of those folks languish there while they are waiting for a Public Defender to be assigned. While this is just one of a lot of reasons for the overcrowding, ultimately it's part of a greater problem we are seeing. The COVID epidemic has helped fuel an incredible rise in our city's crime rate. Our justice system has, as a result bogged down under the huge case load. Further, because there is no room for new cases, our police are hamstrung.

I am in no way advocating an "arrest our way out of this problem" strategy. What I am saying though, is that adequate funding of our Public Defender system will start to alleviate the logjam we are seeing. If you have an opportunity to help us, I ask that you do so.

We have to do what we can to stop the crime wave in our city. There just isn't any choice in the matter. Also, there just isn't one solution for our problem. We need your help in this fight to get things started.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mike Nelson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Mike Nelson
Northern Hotel



RECEIVED

OCT -6 2021

Mayor

Honorable Senator Mark Blasdel
Chair, Economic Transformation & Stabilization and Workforce Development Advisory Commission
1301 E. 6th St.
Helena, MT 59601

Dear Senator Blasdel,

The Billings Chamber of Commerce prioritized public safety over two years ago as our membership continued to face problems related to public safety in Billings. Among other things, we implemented a crime prevention program to educate and empower member businesses. But nothing could have prepared our businesses for the manner in which Covid-19 would exacerbate the situation.

One cannot ignore the role that the Covid-19 pandemic played in this current crime wave. Mandatory business closures meant that business owners and customers were no longer present to provide passive surveillance—a key component of crime prevention—to city streets. Meanwhile, hundreds of people suddenly found themselves out of a job, and research suggests that higher unemployment leads to higher incidents of crime. Near the start of the pandemic, the criminal justice system in Billings, in effect, briefly shut down, creating a backlog the courts are still working to sort out. Worst of all, limited capacity at the Yellowstone County Jail meant that even multiple offenders often escaped accountability and became more brazen. We hear our police officers sarcastically refer to their work as, “catch-and-release policing.”

Recent data shows that our businesses are feeling the effects. This Spring, the Billings Chamber surveyed its membership on the public safety impact to their business. Of the 260 Billings Chamber member survey respondents, a majority (54%) indicated their business was moderately or greatly impacted by public safety issues. Only 10% indicated they were not impacted. Looking at the stats from the Billings Police Department's 2020 Annual Report, it's no surprise that so many businesses are indicating they've been negatively affected. According to the BPD report, compared to 2019, Billings saw a 350% increase in homicides, a 33% increase in robberies, a 52% increase in aggravated assaults, and a 26% increase in burglaries.

Anecdotally, we hear from business owners across the city how offenders are impacting the bottom line. One hotelier paid time off and offered counseling for an employee who saved a man's life by plugging gunshot wounds with his fingers. Downtown businesses deal with transients who frighten potential shoppers. West End shopkeepers face vandalism, the East Billings Industrial Revitalization District deals with significant theft issues, and a bar owner in the Heights fears taking out the trash after closing time. This level of crime increases the cost of doing business while simultaneously encouraging customers to go elsewhere. Businesses have invested in access control, surveillance systems, and other security measures to improve safety. Billings residents can tell of relatives who prefer to shop online or go to another town, rather than come to Billings. Our businesses are experiencing a terrible workforce shortage which will only be exacerbated by a high crime rate. Safety and the economy are intrinsically linked, and in both arenas, Billings needs relief.

Daniel J. Brooks
Business Advocacy Director
Billings Chamber of Commerce