

OPINION

THE HUTCHINSON
NEWS

Editorial Board

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EDITORIAL

Criminal behavior

Crime in Hutchinson will swell if we don't call it a problem

Hutchinson has a serious problem, one the city, some leaders, law enforcement and residents seem reluctant to acknowledge or address.

Property crime, most of which is tied to drug addiction, is out of control and getting worse. From the north to the south, no part of Hutchinson is safe from those who hope to steal away with something of value as a means to buy food, drugs or put a little cash in their pockets.

And though we might want to put our best foot forward and show the world our game faces, under that facade we all know the truth: In most Hutchinson neighborhoods, if you don't want something to walk away, it must be bolted down and locked away.

In the past year, Hutchinson has seen 446 burglaries and experienced more than 3,800 property crimes. That sets Hutchinson's property crime index – crimes per 1,000 people – at 90.55, more than three times the state property crime index of 28.7 in 2012.

Yet, as a community, we seemingly hope to ignore what most everyone knows as truth. We pretend it's not that bad or that it's contained to a certain area. We delude ourselves with the idea that we can escape to our homes or the safety of our neighborhoods where these sort of things don't happen.

But we know that's not true. A map of the city's crime shows that no area remains untouched.

Both the Fourth and Fifth Avenue Dillons stores employ evening security details, and people can be seen wandering the streets at all hours of the day and night.

Former Mayor Ron Sellers foiled a burglary attempt, and Prairie Dunes was hit by thieves.

It's even a standing topic of conversation in town to avoid certain convenience stores in the late evening, unless one wants to get an up-close look at the life of drug addicts.

Much like an illness, the longer we ignore the symptoms and delay treatment, the more invasive and entrenched this problem will become, until it becomes untreatable.

And when Hutchinson's drug and crime culture walked into a north Hutchinson home in 2011 to kill an innocent mother who was caring for her child, the time for ignoring crime as a serious problem had long since passed.

Money, or the lack of it, is largely the excuse this community uses to accept the status quo.

The argument goes that we don't have the money for more police, there's none for aggressive drug treatment, it's expensive to fully staff the county's drug enforcement unit and the voters won't support additional taxes to address this issue.

Yet we don't know if that's true because we've not asked the question and we've come up with few new ideas in a generation.

Year after year, law enforcement asks for more staff but offers few thoughts on how to better use them. And year after year, the city council focuses on its budget and holds the line on taxes.

Until we force ourselves to talk about Hutchinson's crime and its causes, and search for inventive and creative ways to prevent it, we will watch our city deteriorate.

There are a few bright spots, including Reno County Drug Court and the Crime Reduction Task Force.

But drug court intervenes after a crime and is reactive in nature. The Crime Reduction Task Force has raised awareness in the community but struggled to win support and engagement from the Hutchinson Police Department, the agency that should be most interested in solving Hutchinson's ballooning property crimes.

Any hope of reducing crime in Hutchinson will have to start from the city council, but it must be more than talk and recognition of a problem. The council needs to make this a top priority, explore ways to pay for new programs and offices – even considering dedicated crime reduction funding – and lean on the police department to explore a new way to address crime in this city. Doing anything less will ensure that Hutchinson never reaches its full potential.

The Alley

Hutch entertainment center sports state-of-the-art bowling

To call the soon-to-be-built Hutchinson entertainment center a bowling alley short-changes the venue.

Details involving The Alley of Hutchinson, fashioned after The Alley in Wichita, wowed city council members on Tuesday, which is not an easy task.

Bowling is just one activity participants can engage in when the venue opens later this year or early 2015.

"It's going to be worth the wait," investor Brad Dillon told the council.

Dillon ran down the list of amenities, which includes bumper cars, state-of-the-art bowling lanes and a bar and grill. The complex is ADA-compliant, so it will cater to kids and those with disabilities. It also will have a 2,200-square-foot laser tag game room and an arcade with 30 to 40 games.

No bowling alley is worth its bowling balls without food. And it seems The Alley will fit that bill. AJ's Sports Grill will seat 96 diners and showcase a 29-inch-diameter pizza.

The Alley will improve upon the Wichita concept, which is a great venue in its own right.

"We're going to have a facility that is the absolute state of the art right now," Dillon said. "There won't be another city our size anywhere in the country that will have anything nicer."

After losing its bowling alley on 30th Avenue several years ago, Hutch residents are ready to take to the lanes. It also will become the home alley for the Hutch High bowling team and sponsor an often nationally ranked Wichita State University squad.

Hutch is due something shiny and entertaining. The Alley of Hutchinson looks to be that jewel.



DILLON

JOIN THE DISCUSSION

The News encourages readers to share their opinions on this page and offers a number of ways to do so:

(1) Write a letter to the Western Front on any topic. Send to The News at 300 W. Second Ave., Hutchinson, KS, 67504-0190; fax to (620) 662-4186 or email to westernfront@hutchnews.com.

Letters should be limited to 500 words. Poems, consumer complaints, business testimonials and group-written letters will not be accepted. Please sign your name and provide your address and a phone number so we may call to verify the letter. We strive to publish letters within one week of verification. There is a 30-day waiting period between submissions.

Western Front letters are subject to editing for space considerations and libel concerns.

(2) Respond directly to a newspaper editorial by joining our online opinions blog. Go to www.hutchnews.com/editorialblogs and comment on any of our latest posts. A selection of constructive comments may be excerpted to go with opinions that are published in a later print edition of The News.



COLUMNISTS

Coming soon: What's ingrained in Kansas life

With every passing day, it's drawing closer. Listen carefully, you might be able to hear the rustling of nearly golden-brown Jagger heads in the wind. Farmers across the state are servicing their machinery in preparation for the coming days ahead of them. The itch is setting in. Soon they'll be getting restless.

In just a few short days, these men and women will be working countless hours to bring in a year's worth of labor and a large portion of their livelihood. Everyone contributes in his or her own way. It takes all kinds to accomplish this feat. For most, this is a family affair, something they've done since they were old enough to steer a tractor. For others, it's just another job, and they'll move on to the next job when this one is finished.

Slowly the grain elevators that keep an ever-watchful eye over Kansas are coming back to life. Wheat harvest is almost upon us. There's a great beauty to this. Participating in this yearly ritual is what it truly means to be a Kansan.

This is my favorite time of year, aside from possibly Christmas and K-State football



Tim Schrag

season. Judge all you like, I don't care. Some of the best memories I have come from the harvest field. It's a time of year I get to spend with my dad and grandfather essentially uninterrupted until the last head is cut. My family has been doing this for generations.

Plenty of other families in the area can surely say the same. For many of those who take part in cutting wheat come from a similar background or a story along these lines. It's in our blood. I don't consider myself a farmer – that's not a path for me – but I'm incredibly proud of the heritage and background I come from. Being able to help bring in a crop once a year is good enough for me. That's why I like to help. I wish more people had the opportunity to participate in harvest. I think they'd be more inclined to think of Kansas the way I do.

There's a sense of great accomplishment looking over an uncut

field in the morning and by late evening gazing upon an empty field and a day's work. In many ways, this hasn't changed since our ancestors settled in Kansas and brought in their first crop. Sure, the technology has changed over time, but the basics are still the same.

Our amber waves of grain are what have fed this nation for over a century and are at the center of our state's economy. They're important and shouldn't be so easily dismissed by the common passerby. Farming isn't a glamorous job, but someone has to do it. That doesn't mean it can't be poetic or worthwhile. Though I suppose that's just like each year's individual crop.

This year isn't likely going to be as bountiful of a crop, but like every year in Kansas when the time is right, farmers will fire up their combines and bring in the harvest. When they are finished, it will be time to start preparing for next year's crop, and the cycle continues. Life goes on here in the wheat state.

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NRA backtracks from rarity of making sense

A few days ago, the NRA inadvertently said something reasonable.

This, in response to a series of protests in Texas.

It seems advocates of the right to carry firearms openly have taken to showing up en masse at public places – coffee shops, museums, restaurants, etc. – toting shotguns and assault rifles.

So say you're snapping photos at Dealey Plaza, and up sidles some guy with an AK slung over his shoulder.

That sudden dryness of mouth and tightness of sphincter you feel is not reassurance.

"This is terrifying," a visitor from Washington state told The Dallas Morning News. "We have guns in our house, but we don't walk around with them. ... This is shocking."

The NRA seemed to agree. In an unsigned online editorial, it stated the obvious, calling the practice of bringing long guns into public places "dubious," "scary" and "downright weird."

Days later, having come, well ... under fire, from Texas gun groups, the NRA was in retreat, apologizing and blaming this rare lapse of lucidity on a staff member who apparently failed to drink his full allotment of Kool-Aid.

The organization assured its followers that it still supports the right of all people to bring all guns into all places.

One gets the sense, when people argue for these "guns everywhere" policies, that they see themselves as restoring some frontier spirit lost in the passage of centuries. A few weeks back, former Sen. Rick Santorum contended on "Face the Nation" that "gun crimes were not very prevalent" in the Old West because everyone was armed.

But they weren't. In his book, "Gunfight: The Battle Over the Right to Bear Arms in America," UCLA professor of constitutional law Adam Winkler reveals that gun control in the Old West was actually quite strict.

In Dodge City, you were required to turn in your guns when you got to town. The iconic Gunfight at the OK Corral was ignited when Wyatt and Virgil



Leonard Pitts

Earp tried to enforce a similar ordinance in Tombstone, Arizona. So the idea that everyone in the Old West was packing is a relic of TV and movie westerns, but it is not history.

And while the modern gun rights movement is usually regarded as a conservative construction, Winkler writes that it was actually born of liberal extremism.

It seems that in 1967, a heavily armed group of Black Panthers showed up and walked brazenly into the California statehouse – there were no metal detectors – as a group of children were readying for a picnic with the new governor, Ronald Reagan.

The Panthers saw this as an exercise of their constitutional rights.

Reagan and other conservative Republicans saw it as a threat and crafted laws to stop it from happening again.

The future president said, "There's no reason why on the

street today a citizen should be carrying loaded weapons."

The point being that what conservatives seem to regard as a mission of restoration isn't.

This idea that everyone in Chipotle's should be armed is neither some holdover from the Old West nor some time-honored value inextricable from conservatism.

No, it is wholly new. And wholly mad.

While some gun rights advocates must know this, they can't say it in a movement where any deviation from orthodoxy is regarded as heresy.

We saw that a few months ago when Guns & Ammo magazine banished a columnist who wrote that gun owners should accept some form of regulation. We see it again with this NRA staffer who has been disavowed and presumably sent off to be re-educated.

This self-reinforcing group-think stifles any meaningful debate on America's gun problem and speaks volumes about the mind of the gun rights movement.

It will fight for you to take an AK into McDonald's.

But you are not allowed to question whether you should.

Email Leonard Pitts at lpitts@miamiherald.com.



Tony Gutierrez/Associated Press

Kory Watkins, front, coordinator for Open Carry Tarrant County, carries his Romanian AK-47 over his shoulder as he and his wife Janie, rear, along with others, gather for a demonstration in Haltom City, Texas, on May 29.