

Response to Curing Spokane Video

Councilmember Breean Beggs

Summary:

The Curing Spokane video uses outdated facts and footage of a small group of people suffering from acute issues of addiction to paint Downtown Spokane as a scary city rampant with crime, without offering real solutions to our underlying problems. Building a new jail or a large underground bus station, as the video suggests, will not decrease the number of people who are addicted to drugs and/or committing crimes, but it will place a huge burden on taxpayers, and divert money away from the social workers that are working hard to make Spokane safer. I support increasing police visibility Downtown by expanding the number of officers and ensuring they are out walking and talking to folks on the streets, but Spokane will not be safer until our justice system attacks the root causes of crime. We must give police the tools they need to hold people accountable and start fully providing the services that will end what is fueling crime and addiction. We should be focusing our financial resources on expanding proven programs that will make our city safer like pre-trial supervision of offenders after their arrest, more drug treatment and mental health beds, and more affordable housing units for the poor.

Full Response:

Record-breaking investment is happening right now in Spokane, **bigger than in decades**. Throughout the city, new buildings are going up and old buildings are being refurbished, we are spending more than ever before to improve our streets, our unemployment is down and people are flocking to Spokane to live and visit. Previously vacant downtown blocks are filling up with new restaurants, brewpubs and wineries. Developers are restoring old buildings and building new ones to house the new urbanists in the heart of Spokane, creating a walkable culture centered on a re-imagined Riverfront Park. Those outside of Spokane looking in have awarded us with rankings on numerous top ten lists. Those of us inside Spokane know that in previous decades, Spokane deferred maintenance of its roads leaving a huge gap to fill and at the same time we neglected our people infrastructure. We are one of the poorest cities of our size which leads to more crime, mental health issues, and addiction as those living with trauma and desperation predictably act out. **Our challenge as a city is to match our new investments in roads, parks and buildings with similar strategic investments in people and neighborhoods.** It will take some time and creativity; but working together in the same direction we can reduce our separate but sometimes interrelated social problems of crime, mental health, addiction, and homelessness.

The problem with the Curing Spokane video is that it distorts the facts and seeks to divide our city into “us” and “them.” Spokane’s quality of life is rapidly attracting people and businesses from bigger cities which has driven up housing prices and congestion. City and

County governments are adjusting to these changes, but **anyone who has worked downtown over the last few decades would agree that Spokane is more vibrant than ever.** The challenge is how to preserve the best of Spokane with this new growth of people and businesses. **As a downtown business owner and Councilmember, I walk (or ride a Lime scooter) on our downtown streets almost every day.** The uptick in energy and innovation downtown is dramatically different from even 15 years ago.

The video's comparison of Boise and Spokane is misguided. While Boise and Spokane do share some similarities, they are located in different states with different applicable laws and tax structures. Boise has the benefit of being a state capitol and the wealth that brings with it. Most notably, the Spokesman Review describes Boise's median household income as 24% higher than Spokane's (\$54,547 to \$44,768). SR 8/30/2019. The 3rd Legislative District, where Downtown Spokane is located, is often referred to as one of the poorest in Washington State. According to the Spokane Health District, life expectancy is 20 years less for Downtown residents than on the South Hill or in Mead. Similarly, there is a 90-fold difference in violence suffered by residents between the Riverside Neighborhood and wealthier neighborhoods. The high rates of domestic violence and child abuse in the Downtown neighborhood results in a 3.3 times greater likelihood of a serious mental illness in adults. While Spokane starts with much greater challenges of poverty, mental and physical health, and resulting violence than Boise, Spokane is rising to those challenges. **Just like we have used new taxpayer approved investments and technology to rebuild half of our arterial street network, Spokane is working on solving its human services infrastructure problems.** Starting behind Boise with 24% less annual income means it will take longer to match Boise, but there is no reason we can't meet and exceed Boise's quality of life. Plus, Boise has a much higher cost of living and housing than Spokane.

The video also distorts several issues, including using out-of-date crime statistics for Spokane that exaggerate the crime rate Downtown. The video incorrectly implies that there were 641 crime reports at the STA Downtown Bus Plaza in the first five months of 2019. The actual number was 99 as reported in the Spokesman Review on August 30, 2019 and there are numerous security guards and a police officer onsite, making it one of the safer parts of Downtown. The Spokesman reports that crime has been falling for several years in Spokane, including reductions in 2019 of 13% city-wide and 17% Downtown. SR 6/16/2019. The video footage picks out isolated negative behavior around the City of people on their worst days, without showing the vast majority of downtown people engaged in vibrant retail, hospitality, and the cultural and recreational activities that predominate every day and evening in Downtown Spokane. Just this last weekend Pig Out in the Park temporarily transformed the newly refurbished park into the County's 3rd largest city with days of diverse people, food and music. People of all ages and backgrounds participated fully without fear. The Boise underground bus plaza is very small and underutilized compared to Spokane. I caught a city bus in Boise last October at 4:30 pm on a workday. There were only two buses there, five people on my bus and no more than twenty people in the entire station. Compare this to Spokane's station which at any one time is filled with hundreds of people of all incomes and abilities. **Large crowds of people who are reducing pressure on traffic and parking should not be conflated**

with danger. The video does not explain how many hundreds of millions of dollars of taxpayer funds it would take to build a Spokane-sized underground bus terminal, how doing so would change the number of or types of people or behavior in it, or what programs and initiatives Spokane would have to give up to fund such a project.

Increasing police visibility Downtown is supported by the City Council. That includes more officers, getting them out of their cars and onto the sidewalks and even re-opening a mini-headquarters in the vacant space on the second floor of the STA Plaza. This Council has funded dozens of new officers, many of which the current administration has not yet hired or deployed. Most importantly, all people need to see and interact with police officers Downtown, which means police getting back to walking and riding bikes throughout the Downtown. With our officers walking the streets and engaging with those they encounter, visitors will feel more secure and troublemakers will be less likely to cause problems. Similarly, the Business Improvement Ambassadors could be trained on a new approach of engaging with the people they see Downtown instead of waiting for a problem to develop.

The video also implies that if Spokane spent hundreds of millions of dollars on a new and bigger jail, that in itself would reduce crime. There is no evidence that crime would fall, and **The Washington Institute of Public Policy reports that choosing incarceration over community supervision increases the rate of recidivism and is more costly to taxpayers and victims in the long run.** The video provides no estimate of the cost of a new jail or what taxes would be raised to build it or operate it. We do know that placing a jail far away from the Courthouse, as proposed in the video, would substantially increase operational costs to transport prisoners to and from court every day.

The problem with the current jail is not its size or location, but how the current beds are being used. The current practice is to fill up beds with nonviolent people who have not been convicted of a crime but are awaiting trial. By using Community Pre-trial Supervision Officers, hundreds of these people could be safely supervised outside the jail at a lower cost with access to treatment services. This would ensure that there was always an open bed for troubled people arrested by the police who need an immediate consequence and functional timeout from their anti-social behavior. It would also reduce the overcrowding and deaths in the current jail, including better protecting jail staff. The City and County are already piloting several programs that will reduce the jail population and stop the current practice of immediately releasing people arrested for property crimes. This approach will reduce pressure on the current budget, prevent a future huge tax hike, and reduce crime in the long-term since these programs are proven to reduce recidivism.

Finally, the video suggests that improving parking Downtown will reduce crime. **The City agrees that our parking system can be improved, and I sat on the committee that oversaw the recently completed Downtown Parking Study.** The City Council then approved a contract with a consultant to implement the findings of that study. One of the best proposals is to create a Park Spokane Program that would help us all utilize the thousands of currently unused off-street parking spaces by installing universal signage, payment systems, and standards linked to smartphones so that drivers can quickly identify the closest and cheapest vacant spots to their destination. And while offering free parking

on the street downtown is appealing, that would make it even harder to find those scarce street spaces which are only 15% of the parking inventory Downtown. What the study suggested is that the City better enforce overparking at Downtown meters and adjust pricing for demand. I personally believe that any changes in meter rates should take into account the lower incomes in Spokane and not reserve the meters for the wealthy, but that conversation is continuing at City Hall. By all accounts the meters in the retail core of Spokane are full and don't need any further encouragement to get people to use them. Easier parking in the off-street lots would bring more people Downtown and would add to the vibrancy and feeling of security.

The real estate developers who produced and appeared in this video are an important part of continuing Spokane's recent momentum forward and I recognize that they share the same concern for our community that I do. I hope that they will turn their expertise to the fundamental problem Spokane faces a serious lack of affordable housing for middle and low income residents. **On September 1, 2018, the Mayor's Office closed 250 beds at our only city- funded, 24/7 crisis shelter. The decision to close those beds without a substitute shelter or plan for those 250 homeless people kicked off the current crisis and community conversation on homelessness.** The Council has offered to use our current healthy financial reserve account to replace those beds, but we still await a contract from the Mayor that we can sign. There is also a current absence of day services for adult homeless men downtown, driving them into libraries, Starbucks, and other locations where some people are offended by their presence. The Council has reduced building regulations in the City and increased incentives to build targeted housing. We need developers to utilize these new tools to build the affordable housing that can move the homeless out of what looks like refugee camps into secure shelter. And we of course need to continue using our influence in Olympia to provide Spokane more mental health and substance abuse treatment resources. Currently there is a long waiting list, which only makes it more difficult for police and the courts to deal with people violating our laws in Spokane. In the end, we must hold people accountable for their misbehavior and provide the resources for them to heal and return to being a meaningful part of our community. **I don't believe Spokane needs to be "Cured," but there are many people and relationships that need to be healed. We can only do it together using proven best practices informed by data and a commitment to the value of every person in our community.**