

# MOUNTAINS

## Will police eliminate drug suppression unit?

Joel Burgess Asheville Citizen Times  
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE – As part of wide-ranging reforms proposed after a week of protests against police violence and racial bias, Chief David Zack said he would abolish the department’s drug suppression unit.

That proposal along with the rest of Zack’s 30/60/90 Day Action Plan are now on hold after activists criticized the process, saying reforms should originate from the community not police.

But on July 2 as the city prepares to start a community engagement program, key activists and city leaders said they still back the idea.

### Racially disproportionate arrests

Michael Hayes, executive director of Umoja Health, Wellness and Justice Collective, said Zack should have first met with “those most affected” by over-policing on drugs and gotten their input.

“That being said, I think if he does it, great. Because we know who has been targeted by the drug suppression unit and we know how people of color are regularly convicted of petty crimes,” said Hayes, an organizer of the largest day of Asheville protests which drew more than 1,000 June 6.

Police actions against high-level dealers are necessary to combat the drug epidemic, he said, but said it could be done while not overcharging for

small crimes, like marijuana possession.

An analysis of Asheville Police Department arrests showed Black residents accounted for 39% of misdemeanor marijuana possession charges since 2012. That is despite Black residents making up just 12% of the city population and marijuana use being relatively equal among African Americans and whites nationwide, though it is higher among whites when it comes to lifetime use.

Hayes aid funding should be redirected to “culturally-aligned” treatment that includes peer counseling and other support.

### Large amount of gun crime

Zack, who became chief job Feb. 4, announced his plan in his first appearance before the City Council June 9.

“There has been too much emphasis placed on the enforcement of low-level drug crimes. We will place a greater focus on violent and property crimes,” he said.

Zack has said he was shocked at Asheville’s level of gun violence compared to Cheektowaga where he chief next to Buffalo, New York. In a Feb. 4 interview he pointed to 2019 figures including 262 reports of victims of gun violence.

On July 2, Zack confirmed the plan was on hold, saying “we will be seeking community input on how we move forward.”

### Council support, concerns

But a majority of council members — Mayor Esther Manheimer, Vice Mayor Gwen Wisler, Brian Haynes, Julie Mayfield and Keith Young— said they back more emphasis on violent crime.

Manheimer said she was “very supportive of that change” and pointed to recent killings in Klondyke and the Erskine-Walton neighborhoods.

“Clearly more resources need to be allocated to and focused on fighting violent crime in Asheville. And more resources need to be dedicated to preventing problems that lead to violence.”

Manheimer said conversations she had been part of on the opioid epidemic say that criminal enforcement “is pretty much useless.”

Amy Upham, Buncombe County public health opioid response coordinator, said that people are most successful when they have medication-assisted treatment and other stabilizing factors in their lives.

“From a public health perspective—individuals who are housed, have employment, health insurance, and access to transportation are less likely to continue to experience trauma that could lead to return to use,” Upham said. “This includes incarceration, which research from University at North Carolina Gillings School of Public Health shows increases a person’s risk of overdose 40 times over in the first two weeks after release.”

Wisler said “APD should focus on crimes that have victims; that will help to keep our community safer,” while Haynes, the chair of the council’s public safety committee said the unit’s elimination was “long overdue but only a start.”

“Now we must reevaluate nationwide, the whole failed War on Drugs policy while addressing the catastrophic effects it’s had on our society,” he said.

Mayfield said she agreed with more of a focus on violent crime, but said she didn’t know the implications of not focusing as much on drug crime.

“I wouldn’t want to send a message that Asheville is open for the drug trade, but maybe there is another way to tackle that issue without that unit.”

Young, one of two black council members, said the council should seriously look at supporting the unit’s elimination “if that is what he chief wants to do.”

“I’m interested in how that fills out the larger picture. I don’t think I can critique one or two policy changes and vet them as mutually exclusive to another.”

Council members Vijay Kapoor and Sheneika Smith did not respond to requests for comment.

Joel Burgess has lived in WNC for more than 20 years, covering politics, government and other news. He’s written award-winning stories on topics ranging from gerrymandering to police use of force. Please help support this type of journalism with a subscription to the Citizen Times.

## The Obscure Tale of the Appalachian Cottontail



Word from the Smokies  
Frances Figart

What’s that cute, fluffy animal with long ears hopping at top speed across the top of Clingmans Dome in Great Smoky Mountains National Park? Is it the common eastern cottontail, or could it be the rare Appalachian cottontail?

The Appalachian cottontail (*Sylvilagus obscurus*) is a charismatic high-elevation species of rabbit thought to be restricted to the Appalachian Mountains south of New York. As the scientific name suggests, it is not easy to see and is hard to distinguish from its cousin, the very similar eastern cottontail. In general, Appalachian cottontails have a thick, dark line around the edge of their slightly shorter ears and usually have a black spot between the ears, lacking the eastern cottontail’s white forehead spot or rust color between the ears.

Ph.D. research scientists Liesl Erb, JJ Apodaca, and Corinne Diggins can tell the two species apart by studying features of their skeletons and their DNA. They have spent part of the past three years learning more about this fascinating critter in a study sponsored by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission and hosted in part by Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

“There was relatively little data on this species in the southern Appalachian Mountains prior to our study, including information on their distribution and habitat use in the region,” said Diggins, a research scientist with the Department of Fish and Wildlife Conservation at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg. “Because the Appalachian cottontail is a federal species of concern and a ‘knowledge gap species’ in North Carolina, the NC Wildlife Resources Commission was interested in determining baseline information on the species.”



An Appalachian Wildlife Rescue rehabilitator holds a baby cottontail. The Asheville nonprofit rescued more than 1,700 wild animals in Western North Carolina last year. COURTESY OF APPALACHIAN WILDLIFE RESCUE

The researchers used trapping and telemetry data as well as transects, counting pellet piles to determine habitat preferences. The Appalachian cottontail is generally thought of as preferring high-elevation, cold habitat, but the researchers found them in locations that were generally cool, though not necessarily the coldest spots, and in sites that were fairly wet year-round.

“In higher elevations, the rabbits selectively used heath balds and spruce-fir forest,” said Diggins. “In lower elevations, they selectively used habitats with significant pine and hemlock. Overall, they selected for certain habitat types and we found them at a wider range of elevations than we had previously thought.”

Erb, who is a professor of Conserva-

tion Biology at Warren Wilson College, focused on the distribution of the species and said there were four genetically distinct populations within the areas studied: Great Smoky Mountains, Roan Highlands, and Pisgah National Forest. Genetically, one of the biggest surprises the study revealed was the fact that hybridization occurs between Appalachian cottontails and eastern cottontails in these locations.

“Eastern cottontails occur at lower elevations in the southern Appalachians,” said Apodaca, the project’s geneticist and lead scientist with Tangled Bank Conservation. “But logging and habitat fragmentation over the last few centuries has potentially aided this species’ invasion into Appalachian cottontail habitat at higher elevations, which may contribute to in-

stances of hybridization. Most hybrids seemed to be from male Appalachians mating with female easterns.”

According to Erb, future study will include “understanding the interactions between these two species, including differences in habitat use in areas where they both co-occur and the rates of hybridization. We also need to understand how habitat fragmentation influences the invasion of eastern cottontails into Appalachian cottontail habitat.”

Another big concern for ongoing research is learning how susceptible the Appalachian cottontail may be to the hemorrhagic virus that is impacting other cottontail species. While this fatal disease was thought to be only seen in domesticated rabbits, there was a recent outbreak in wild populations of cottontails in the Southwest.

This study laid the foundation, but more work needs to be done. Overall, the researchers feel that by providing baseline data on Appalachian cottontails, they are poised to make better recommendations for these rabbits’ continued management and conservation.

“Great Smoky Mountains National Park should be a place of sanctuary for rare species in the high elevations of the southern Appalachians,” said Paul E. Super, science coordinator at Great Smoky Mountains National Park’s Appalachian Highlands Science Learning Center. “Because of the difficulties in identifying this species in the field, we were not even certain a population of Appalachian cottontails remained in the Smokies. This study provides us with good news, not just confirming that these rabbits remain in the park, but also giving us a better understanding of what they need to continue to thrive here.”

Frances Figart is the editor of *Smokies Life* magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 34,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Reach her at frances@gsmassoc.org.

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