

Former Operation Rio Grande collaborators now face off in governor's race

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By Bethany Rodgers

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In the summer of 2017, then-House Speaker Greg Hughes wondered aloud if the state should consider summoning the National Guard to Salt Lake City's troubled Rio Grande neighborhood.

In his estimation, there was no hyperbole in the comment. He'd come to believe the crime and mayhem in the Pioneer Park area was really that bad. An assault on a minor league baseball player had made national headlines. A car had jumped a curb and plowed into a group of people, killing one. A bludgeoning death and shooting death had followed.

Officials had to do something. And, in late July, Gov. Gary Herbert convened a closed-door summit with state, city and county leaders that would lead to a \$67 million law-and-order and homelessness initiative known as Operation Rio Grande.

"That's where we really put the stake in the ground," Hughes recalls. "We were going to combine all of our efforts, with no credit, no blame. Shoulder to shoulder."

Except, when an election year rolls around, modesty often flies out the window. And the "no credit" tone has changed now that Hughes and Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox — both key players in the two-year Rio Grande initiative — are competing to become the state's next governor.

The former House speaker's campaign website makes no secret of where Hughes thinks recognition is due, crediting him with launching what he often calls "the largest multijurisdictional effort since the Winter Olympics."

Cox, who was Herbert's point person for Operation Rio Grande, acknowledges Hughes' role in "shining a spotlight" on the crime and human suffering in the Pioneer Park neighborhood. But the initiative was a group effort, he says, and no one person deserves all the praise for it.

"His way is probably the best way, to take all the credit and not care about anyone else," Cox said of Hughes, his rival in the four-way Republican primary. "But that's not who I am. That's not how I'm wired."

Others don't see Operation Rio Grande as a selling point for either candidate and view the initiative as an expensive law enforcement dragnet that left unsheltered individuals with longer criminal records and more barriers to exiting homelessness.

Mindy Vincent, who runs a syringe-exchange program, says Operation Rio Grande did put some people on the path to treatment and recovery. But she knows many more people who are in the exact same situations or worse because they've racked up additional criminal charges over the past couple of years.

"People's access to treatment should never be through the criminal justice system," she said.

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(Al Hartmann | Tribune file photo) In this Jan. 26, 2015, file photo, House Speaker-elect Greg Hughes, left, chats with Utah Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox at the back door of the House of Representatives before taking the oath of office at the start of the 2015 legislative session.

'Not retreating'

Hughes says he'd long heard about problems in the Rio Grande neighborhood, but he didn't understand them until four or five years ago, when he visited at the suggestion of a city police officer. Within the space of a few minutes, the officer escorting Hughes through the area got a report about a man selling stolen cellphones and had to shoo off a car full of young people looking to buy drugs. Moments later, an assault left a man bleeding on the ground next to Hughes. As he recalls it, the attacker, who was chased down by the officer, had been carrying 300 balloons of heroin in a backpack. The quick succession of criminal acts in plain view of the police left Hughes stunned. "It was just so bad," Hughes said. After floating the idea of calling in the National Guard to restore order in July 2017, Hughes landed on another strategy: He'd open a pop-up office in an old police resource center in The Gateway mall. Anyone who wanted a hearing with the House speaker would witness what was happening in the neighborhood.



(Rick Egan | Tribune file photo) Former House Speaker Greg Hughes set up his 'war room' in an unused Salt Lake City Police Department office at 420 West 200 South, to form a short-term plan for the Rio Grande area, July 21, 2017.

Hughes seemed to view himself as a general heading into battle, calling the office space his "war room" and telling a reporter he'd encamped on the "shores of Persia."

"The Persian army outnumbers me 2-to-1, and I'm burning my own boats because I'm not going back. I am not retreating out of this space," he told a Salt Lake Tribune reporter at the time.

Hughes argues the publicity and attention he brought to the neighborhood helped spur other officials and community leaders into action, leading straight to the late July summit where local and state leaders agreed to band together.

After that meeting, Herbert named Cox to help lead the state's response. Cox has also led the state homeless coordinating committee through Operation Rio Grande and the subsequent transition to a wholly new model for providing homeless services in the Salt Lake City area.

Midvale Mayor Robert Hale said while Hughes and Cox had different roles, both were essential to the monumental undertaking.

“On the legislative side, that was [Hughes]. And then on the governor’s side, that was Lieutenant Governor Cox,” said Hale, who’s also a member of the state homeless coordinating committee. “They had to work together, but you can’t do it without both of them.”

But current and former members of the Pioneer Park Coalition, an organization that now has Hughes on its board of directors, say the former House speaker was the driving force behind the initiative, persuading his fellow lawmakers to commit tens of millions of dollars to the effort and pushing decision-makers to work together.

“Greg Hughes should receive the lion’s share of the credit for what happened there,” said Bryson Garbett, a developer and former leader in the Pioneer Park Coalition, a group that advocates on drugs, crime and homelessness in the Rio Grande neighborhood.

However, in considering the drug-use problems that plagued that area, homelessness advocate Bill Tibbitts noted that Hughes opposed Medicaid expansion, limiting funding for drug programs. The former House speaker ultimately got behind a smaller expansion plan that extended coverage to chronically homeless individuals and people with substance abuse problems or mental health needs.

But it didn’t reach everyone.

“It’s worth remembering he was doing that as the opioid epidemic was peaking,” said Tibbitts, associate director of Crossroads Urban Center. “The need for treatment was surging.”

‘Opportunities and alternatives’

The first phase of Operation Rio Grande was dedicated to restoring law and order around Pioneer Park and The Road Home emergency shelter, the hub of homeless services at the time. State troopers and local police flooded the neighborhood in what Cox called a “surgical” effort to “remove the bad guys, and protect our homeless friends.”



(Steve Griffin | Tribune file photo) Law enforcement officers from several agencies swarmed the Pioneer Park area in Salt Lake City as elected leaders launched Operation Rio Grande, Aug. 14, 2017.

In addition to cracking down on crime, the initiative would seek to reach people with substance abuse and mental health problems and connect them to services. The third prong focused on employment and putting people into stable housing.

Cox said executing the plan demanded exceptional coordination between public and private partners and required city, county and state officials to set aside disagreements and sore feelings.

"We all pulled together," he said in a recent interview. "People who didn't like each other very much, people who had differences of opinion."

While Hughes played a major role in getting the ball rolling, Cox praised Jon Pierpont, executive director of the Utah Department of Workforce Services, as "the heart and soul" of Operation Rio Grande and said the agency head was his "right hand" in pulling the initiative together. And Rep. Ben McAdams, D-Utah, then the Salt Lake County mayor, was instrumental in the startup of a drug court program that created a treatment pathway for people struggling with substance abuse, Cox said.

Partners in Operation Rio Grande have touted successes in all three phases of the initiative, reporting sizable drops in the number of serious crimes in the Pioneer Park area. By the summer of 2019, near the two-year anniversary of the operation, officials reported that 174 people had entered treatment through drug court and 246 people had landed jobs through the "dignity of work" program.

Nicole Thomas, a Pioneer Park Coalition board member and small-business owner in the Rio Grande area, said the operation had made a "100%, night-and-day difference" to the neighborhood.

"It was a game-changer," she said.

Operation Rio Grande also set the stage for last year's transition to a new model for sheltering and serving the region's homeless population. The downtown Road Home shelter closed in November, replaced by three smaller resource centers that offer a full suite of health care, case management, job training and housing navigation services.

But the two-year initiative that began it all has attracted its share of criticism from advocates and civil liberties groups.

Vincent sees Operation Rio Grande and The Road Home shelter's closure as part of a larger plan to gentrify the Pioneer Park area and prepare it for development. And she doesn't believe the initiative has made a significant dent in drug dealing or use — it's just scattered the activity to different places.

Moreover, she contends, even the drug dealers who once frequented the Rio Grande area should be viewed with compassion.

"Everybody, including the people who are selling drugs down there," she said, "are people who have been preyed upon by systems and by people all their lives."

While officials argued they were targeting hardened criminals for arrest and extending services to others, the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah has blasted the initiative as a "hammer" that has fallen heavily on homeless individuals who are already struggling to survive.

By August, Operation Rio Grande had resulted in more than 7,200 arrests, but only 20% of them were for felonies. The others were for warrants or more minor crimes.

And in the operation's first 35 days, more than a quarter of the arrests were for low-level offenses such as open container violations, jaywalking, lewdness or camping on public ground, according to a 2019 report prepared by the ACLU.

"Even though the law enforcement focus of [Operation Rio Grande] is winding down, we believe its aftershocks will continue to shape efforts to address the social issues involving homelessness in Salt Lake City," the report stated. "That's because the impact of arrests and fines do not easily vanish from people's list of troubles — especially those with limited resources — but reverberate, often derailing their efforts to rebuild their lives."

Cox argues the civil liberties organization is flat-out wrong in its assessment of the two-year push. There was nothing compassionate about letting crime run rampant in the Pioneer Park area, he said, adding that many of the perpetrators were victimizing homeless people.

“It was that kind of attitude that led to the problem in the first place,” he said. “We gave people opportunities and alternatives.”