

# Tampa Bay officials call for action after Times' Walmart investigation

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Wednesday, May 18, 2016 1:49pm

Officials across Tampa Bay are calling on Walmart to meet with community leaders and to reduce the burden that the corporate giant places on local law enforcement.

"I believe that there's an issue here of an extraordinary expense being passed on to the taxpayer for what might be a responsibility of the business owner," Hillsborough County Commissioner Victor Crist said at a meeting Wednesday.

Crist said he has directed the county attorney's office to work with the county administrator and the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office. He asked that they find a way to make businesses pay for the expense of excessive police calls or increase their private security.

In Hillsborough, seven of the 10 places deputies responded to most in a year were Walmarts, according to a *Tampa Bay Times* investigation published last week.

Tampa City Council member Frank Reddick said Wednesday he planned to bring up the issue during Thursday's council meeting as well as contact Walmart representatives about what can be done to decrease calls to police, including hiring more security or off-duty officers.

"This is ridiculous," Reddick said of the Walmart police calls. "Basically, what they're doing is taking advantage of law enforcement in order for them to save money."

The call to action comes after the *Times* investigation found that Walmarts place a heavier load on local authorities than any other business. Walmarts across the region accounted for nearly 16,800 police calls in just one year, the *Times* found. That's two calls an hour, every hour of every day.

Shoplifting and other thefts were the subject of many of the calls, according to the *Times* analysis, but thousands more were for general disorder like suspected panhandling, loitering and disruptive teens. Those calls rarely led to arrests but sucked up hours of officers' time that police said would have been better spent patrolling neighborhoods and preventing other crimes. Other businesses, including Target, accounted for far fewer police calls than Walmart.

In a statement to the *Times*, Walmart spokeswoman Deisha Barnett said the company will meet with local stakeholders to discuss those issues.

"This is a challenging situation that presents a lot of different issues," Barnett said. "In the coming weeks, we plan to sit down with members of law enforcement and city officials in Tampa, as part of a concerted effort to make investments and deploy the right processes and procedures needed to meet our customer and associate expectations of a safe and enjoyable shopping experience."

The Largo City Commission briefly discussed the issue at a meeting Tuesday night when Commissioner Samantha Fenger said she wanted to explore the potential of charging Walmart a fee for minor calls. The *Times* investigation included information about Beech Grove, Ind., where the police chief declared

Walmart a nuisance, threatening the retailer with up to \$2,500 fines for each call. The policy quickly led to a significant decrease in calls, Beech Grove officials said.

In Largo, two of the top three places police were called to the most in a year were Walmarts. Fenger said the theft calls for small items, such as a bottle of soda or bag of candy, are especially frustrating.

"It's wasting everyone's time and taking away from (officers) for being on the streets for safer neighborhoods," she said in an interview with the *Times*.

Pinellas-Pasco Public Defender Bob Dillinger said his office has been aware of Walmart's impact on police for some time. Any solutions, he added, would have to come from government and law enforcement because attorneys can't use discretion in their caseloads.

"When we're given a case, we're given a case," Dillinger said. "It's had an impact on our office and the State Attorney's Office and the courts."

Retail and criminal justice experts said Walmart could make changes to mitigate the problems before calling police. Some examples? Hiring uniformed security guards or laying out stores in a fashion that is less inviting to thieves and other ill-intentioned opportunists.

"This isn't a small business person who calls a deputy once every five or 10 years. This is a multi-billion dollar corporation that trades on the New York Stock Exchange that is using taxpayers and their dollars to benefit themselves," said Pasco County Tax Collector and former Republican state senator Mike Fasano. "And that's wrong. That's just wrong."

Walmart told the *Times* it will continue to invest in loss prevention technologies, add staff to its stores' entrances and also plans to bring its "Restorative Justice" program to the area, which allows first-time offenders to avoid arrest by completing an educational program.

"We are confident in the work done so far," Barnett said in the company's statement. "But we know we can do better, and we will."

State Rep. Kathleen Peters, R-South Pasadena, said a task force of police, city officials and representatives from area businesses, including Walmart, should convene to address the problem.

Peters said Walmart has to find approaches to security "that don't siphon resources."

"We need our officers on the street for public safety, and not all the calls for the graffiti and the loitering," she said.

The *Times* analysis showed that Plant City police responded to a Walmart more than anywhere else, by far. Chief Edward Duncan said the department has a good relationship with its local store managers, and he plans to propose that they hire an off-duty officer to work in Walmart.

"I'm pretty confident that just the visibility of a uniformed officer during their hours of operation is going to be a deterrent," Duncan said.

Zephyrhills police Capt. Derek Brewer said the *Times* investigation showed him "that the other agencies were dealing with some of the same things" and that his department was not alone in its struggle to manage the Walmart workload.

Still, he said, he wanted a quicker response from the company.

"I was kind of hoping that it would prompt Walmart to reevaluate their practices," he said. "And I haven't really seen that."

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*Shoppers walk into the entrance of a Walmart supercenter recently. [BOYZELL HOSEY | Times]*

**Walmart spokeswoman Deisha Barnett issued this statement to the *Tampa Bay Times* on Wednesday:**

"This is a challenging situation that presents a lot of different issues. In the coming weeks, we plan to sit down with members of law enforcement and city officials in Tampa, as part of a concerted effort to make investments and deploy the right processes and procedures needed to meet our customer and associate expectations of a safe and enjoyable shopping experience.

"We have invested, and continue to invest, in robust technologies and crime prevention efforts while also working with law enforcement and security professionals. We are working aggressively to address this issue — most recently with expanding the More at the Door program, which bolsters extra presence at the front of our stores and helps keep that area clean, safe and secure. We are also piloting a program called Restorative Justice in the Tampa area. Restorative Justice allows alleged first time offenders to complete an educational program as opposed to being arrested and charged, and helps reduce police calls to our stores. The importance of this issue is recognized at the highest levels of the company. No level of criminal activity is acceptable in our stores.

"We are confident in the work done so far. But we know we can do better, and we will."

Tampa Bay officials call for action after Times' Walmart investigation 05/18/16 *[Last modified: Wednesday, May 18, 2016 8:57pm]*

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