

# Lodging Hospitality Management CEO Bob O'Loughlin calls for gun restrictions, more police downtown

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## In This Article



By [Jacob Kirn](#) – Managing Editor, St. Louis Business Journal  
May 24, 2023

An owner of downtown St. Louis hotels said the neighborhood needs restrictions on the open carry of firearms, plus more police presence, in the face of criminal activity, particularly over weekend nights, that has spooked visitors.

"This is ongoing, as you're well aware," said [Bob O'Loughlin](#), chairman and CEO of Lodging Hospitality Management, which owns downtown properties Union Station and Hilton St. Louis at the Ballpark. "You can't just turn your streets over every Friday and Saturday to the youth that shoot guns and through windows and just kind of have intimidation [parties downtown](#). Something has to be done."

O'Loughlin also cited a string of business exits from the central business district, with office moves to other areas of the metro area. "Businesses have moved out. Residents want to move out," he said.

In 2022 and this year, the *Business Journal* has [reported](#) on at least 10 significant office moves out of downtown, included the offices of major law firms Polsinelli and Brown & Crouppen, with just four such moves into the central business district from other areas. Some companies, such as law firm Sandberg Phoenix & Von Gontard, have re-committed to downtown.

And while downtown boosters see increased residential uses as key to the neighborhood's success amid increased work-from-home habits, [high residential vacancy rates and projections that show only modest population growth](#) have tempered the expectations of some. At the same time, downtown person crimes, which include murder and assault, have dropped 17% through April this year, while the same category of crime has increased 7% in Downtown West, driven by a significant increase in simple assaults, [according to police data](#). St. Louis-area violent crime is high compared with peers, [according to an analysis from two business groups this month](#).

O'Loughlin pointed to recent crime he says has directly impacted business, such as a homicide last month that came in the middle of the day in Kiener Plaza, which is adjacent to Hilton St. Louis at the Ballpark. O'Loughlin said Lodging Hospitality Management was hosting a group from Bristol Myers Squibb, the pharmaceutical giant, at the time. "Bristol Myers said, 'Don't go out of your hotel,'" O'Loughlin said. Spokespeople for Bristol Myers Squibb didn't respond to requests for comment.

And O'Loughlin said that after a woman was shot to death earlier this month in the parking garage of the Marriott St. Louis Grand Hotel, tourism chief Kitty Ratcliffe had to spend time with officials with technology firm Hewlett Packard, which was holding a convention downtown, "and tell them that we're going to have police out there." A teenager attending a volleyball convention in February was severely maimed in a high-profile crash.

Spokespeople for Ratcliffe, president of tourism agency Explore St. Louis, referred questions to the office of Mayor Tishaura Jones. Officials from Hewlett Packard didn't respond to a request for comment.

"I have a lot invested downtown and I'd like to see some movement," O'Loughlin said. "It's a problem. We're losing business. Conventions are not coming to St. Louis."

## **Seeking firearms restrictions**

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O'Loughlin suggested a couple solutions.

He said downtown could form an "entertainment district," in which the open carry of firearms is banned. O'Loughlin acknowledged he did not know how such an entity could come into existence.

"That may diffuse some of the problems we've had," O'Loughlin said of a district.

A person who's familiar with special taxing and other districts in Missouri said it's not clear how such an open-carry ban could be enforced in one, particularly since downtown has many property owners, but that the state, which has consistently loosened gun laws, could theoretically pass legislation in line with O'Loughlin's idea. City Alderwoman Cara Spencer, meanwhile, has introduced legislation seeking to ban the open carry of firearms for people who do not have a state concealed carry permit.

O'Loughlin said he'd also like to see more police presence downtown. He said he already spends \$3.5 million a year on "secondary police," or commissioned officers who work for Lodging Hospitality Management on off time. A taxing district, the Downtown St. Louis Community Improvement District, also employs private security.

But O'Loughlin said there should be more city police officers downtown, especially during weekend evenings. The number of city police officers has fallen to 961 commissioned employees as of last month, compared to the 1,200 it employed at the start of 2021.

"For people who go down during the day, or tourists who go to a baseball game or soccer game, visibly seeing police patrolling like in the old days, walking a beat so to speak, would make everybody feel more comfortable and safe. I'd certainly recommend that," O'Loughlin said.

He said that Lodging Hospitality Management would "put up money" for either more primary or secondary police in the neighborhood.

## **The mayor's response**

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Mayor Tishaura Jones declined an interview request, but her spokesman, Nick Desideri, said it's "encouraging to hear that Mr. O'Loughlin is willing to contribute to improve public safety."

"We would welcome his help in reducing poverty in the neighborhoods surrounding Downtown and Downtown West, which is major driver of crime," Desideri said.

He didn't directly address questions about the size of the police presence downtown, but said that new police chief Robert Tracy, who was hired in December, is working to reverse attrition rates, in part through pay increases negotiated this year. The St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department "deploys officers using a data-driven method in regards to crime trends," and Tracy has "deployed appropriate resources to Downtown and has contingencies available when necessary, for example for major events," Desideri said.

He also said that the mayor shares O'Loughlin's frustrations regarding the state's "lax gun laws that have led to a 46% increase in gun homicides" since Missouri removed a requirement that gun owners have a state permit-to-purchase license for concealable firearms.

"We would love to work alongside prominent business leaders like Mr. O'Loughlin to fight for commonsense gun safety laws at the state level," Desideri said, adding that "we are exploring all legal avenues to reduce gun violence in the city." He said that Spencer's proposed legislation is being reviewed, and pointed to a recent crime summit in which leaders in the region pledged to craft a homicide reduction plan.

And Desideri cited Peabody Energy's decision last year to keep its headquarters downtown, and said that St. Louis continues to attract conventions, with 53 bookings at the America's Center convention complex, which is being expanded, so far for this year, up from 51 in 2022 and 38 in 2021.

But the *Business Journal*, citing Explore St. Louis data, reported in April that its bookings are well-off from pre-pandemic years. It booked 418,033 hotel room nights for future conventions in fiscal year 2022, down from 543,826 in fiscal 2019 and 640,570 in fiscal 2018. At the same time, hotel taxes flowing to St. Louis' tourism agency were higher in the first six months of fiscal 2023 than the same period in 2018, as some key metrics in the local hotel market have reached pre-pandemic levels.