

Constable, county sheriff vie to protect Pownal

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POWNAL — Town Constable Joel Howard said during an information session Thursday that the cost of a full-time constable for Pownal would be \$65,000, but a representative from the sheriff's department claimed the cost for additional police coverage could be much less.

The meeting at the Pownal Elementary School was called to discuss the possibility of changing the town's constable position from part-time to full-time. That question is posed in an advisory ballot article on the annual town warrant.

Vermont State Police Lt. Reg Trayah gave a rundown of the town's current law enforcement statistics in his opening remarks. "The Vermont State Police is the primary police coverage for the town of Pownal," Trayah said. "Of the 12 towns we cover, Pownal has the highest caseload, with 761 cases."

Trayah emphasized that the 761 cases could refer to a wide range of matters the police must handle. "They range from alarms going off, burglary, drug cases, domestic assault and sexual assault," Trayah said.

Trayah said that, should the town move to make its constable position full-time, that would not mean the state police would cease activities there. "One thing I heard as that there was some concern that, if the constable's made full-time, the state police will wash their hands of the town," Trayah said. "That's not even close to being true."

Howard said that he had worked out a preliminary budget for a full-time position, which would cost the town \$65,470 annually. That number, said Howard, included not only salary but such things as a fund for a new cruiser, money to use the Bennington Police Department's dispatch services and overtime.

Bennington County Sheriff's Department Capt. Chad Schmidt, a Pownal resident, was present at the meeting. In a letter to the Banner, Schmidt had indicated disappointment that his department had not been invited to speak at the meeting.

"The reason I was upset is because I'm here offering Pownal a solution that I feel is falling on deaf ears," Schmidt said. "I think I have something to offer the town that no one can touch, financially."

Schmidt said his department could offer Pownal service for \$25.50 an hour, with all expenses included. According to Schmidt, the town could receive 40 hours of service from the sheriff's department for \$53,000. He emphasized that the department would have assets not available to a full-time constable, such as the ability to have another officer fill in should one be unavailable.

"If you contract with us for 40 hours, you will get 40 hours," Schmidt said.

Schmidt said his department would go so far as to hire Howard and provide him with a car, if that were the wish of the town.

Schmidt said the town may face unintended consequences should it approve the proposed change, citing the example of one town that intended to hire one full-time police officer and now has six.

"I'm afraid we're opening Pandora's Box here," Schmidt said. "I feel what we need is more police presence, but I also feel we should diversify our portfolio."

Howard was asked about his priorities, as he is also chief of one of the town's fire departments. He said that, if he were needed at a fire, he would respond to it and allow the state police to handle any pressing law-enforcement needs.

Resident Ray Shields asked if changing the position of constable from elected to appointed was a good idea.

"This town hires an awful lot of family," Shields said. "Why would I feel better if you were appointed, as opposed to elected, where the whole town hires you?"

Howard said the change was intended to protect the town's investment in his training.

Trayah agreed that the move would be better for the town. "If any of you ran a business, would you want an employee you couldn't fire?" Trayah said. "If he's appointed, the town has control over him. If he's elected, he's in the position for his term."

Residents questioned whether the town needed to move the constable to full-time, given the state police coverage of the town.

"It comes down to local control and how much local control you want," Trayah said.

Police priorities

Trayah, using concerns about speeding at Barber's Pond expressed earlier in the meeting, said a local constable would not be distracted by problems in other towns.

"If you call us about speeders at Barber's Pond Road and we have an accident elsewhere, sorry, but we're not available," Trayah said. "With certain things, we have to prioritize."