

## Howard backs sheriff's plan

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POWNAL — Constable Joel Howard on Monday endorsed a proposal from the Bennington County Sheriff's Department for the town to contract for police patrols. Speaking at the annual town meeting, Howard said the proposal includes his being hired full-time with the department and patrolling the town.

A question on the annual ballot had asked that the constable's position be made full time, but Howard said he no longer backs that idea.

"I think there is definitely a need for additional police protection," said Howard. "I think the Sheriff's Department is probably your best deal right now."

That proposal has been detailed by Capt. Chad Schmidt of the department. He said it would cost the town \$53,040 annually for 40 hours of police work per week. Howard would be hired and given a car by the department and allowed to patrol in the town, Schmidt said.

"In the spirit of compromise, I had a luncheon meeting with Joel, and I think I can offer the town something at a cheaper option," said Schmidt. "You're getting what you are asking for. You can't get much more local control than that."

Schmidt asked voters to reject an advisory ballot article asking for the constable's position to be made full time and an article that will set \$7,500 into a sinking fund for a new police vehicle because one would be given to Howard as a member of the Sheriff's Department. The state police, town officials, Howard and the Sheriff's Department would meet to determine times of patrol, said Schmidt.

"I just want to make sure we walk before we run," said Schmidt. "I'm not trying to shove my ideas down anybody's throat; let's get everything out on the table and see the options."

Though some residents are pushing for additional police protection, a show of hands at the meeting revealed that a majority of residents feel that current police presence is adequate. Last year, an article to contract with the Sheriff's Department at a cost of \$25,000 for additional patrols was defeated by voters.

Select Board member Stephen Kauppi said that Pownal is a safe town and the increases in crime rates does not reflect an increase in crimes committed; it reflects an increase in people being caught.

"Of 12 towns the state police cover, there were 761 cases and yes, Pownal is number one, but you have to remember that if the wind blows and an alarm goes off, that is an incident," said Kauppi. "Has crime increased or has more people been caught? Joel has handled 74 incidents, which includes seven arrests. He is obviously doing a super job."

Select Board member Harry "Hap" Percey said that a committee will be set up regardless of the vote to look at increasing police protection.

Howard proposed during a meeting on Thursday that becoming a full-time constable would cost the town \$65,000, but the town debated aspects of the position, including oversight. Currently, as an elected official, the constable does not have a boss.

Select Board members said that they have worked toward increased police presence in recent years, which included continual increases in the constable's budget. The board has previously discussed switching the position from elected to appointed, which would make the constable an employee.

Kauppi also said he was disappointed that the Select Board was not invited to a public forum held on Thursday to discuss the issue and said the meeting was held "improperly," because it was held in the school with the Select Board or the School Board's consent.

According to Kauppi, the school principal was misled into thinking the forum was being held by the communication and image committee, but instead was organized by individuals. Using school means using the town's insurance, he said.

"Of course the Select Board was invited; they are members of the public," said Kathleen Gaffney, who organized the meeting with her husband.