

Testimony before the Municipal and County Government Committee
January 26, 2010

My name is Frederick Bishop and I have been a resident of Hooksett for nearly 40 years. I wish to speak against increasing the number of police commissioners in Hooksett.

My education includes a BS degree in Accounting from SNHU and an MBA from the University of NH. I retired from PSNH six years ago after completing 44 years with that company. My last position was director of Customer Service for the State of NH, where I was responsible for 300 employees in NH.

Over the past 35 years I've done a lot of volunteer work. This included serving in leadership positions in a number of organizations, some of which were in Hooksett. Currently I serve on the Hooksett Economic Development Committee (HEDC) where I chair its business visitation program. In 2002, I was selected as Hooksett's Citizen of the Year. Included in my volunteer work is serving six years on the Hooksett Police Commission, with two years serving as chair of the commission. During my six years, I dealt with two chiefs of police and one interim chief. As a result I have good understanding of the Commission's functions and responsibilities. One thing I learned that police departments can have an unusually large number of employee performance issues. Another is that police officers should never lie during internal investigations. To do so can damage the officer's credibility in later court settings.

The 3-person Commission has very limited responsibilities. These include having only one direct report: the Chief of Police. Responsibilities include hiring, disciplining and firing the chief. The Commission has the final word on hiring and firing all police department employees. It also has responsibilities for developing and managing the budget. The Commission has no law enforcement responsibilities whatsoever.

Commissioners come from various backgrounds. Today in Hooksett, one is a business person who previously served as a Town Councilor. Another is a respected CPA who has a long record of community service. The third is a former chair of the School Board and member of the Planning Board. Her spouse is a superior court judge. Commissioners are appointed by the Town Council to a 3-year term. One commissioner is appointed each year. The chairmanship is rotated among the three commissions so that each serves as chair for a year.

It's important to ask ourselves why are we here looking at increasing the number of commissioners from 3 to 5. What is the problem? Things were quiet with the Police Department and Police Commission until about a year ago. A small group

of community activists began openly criticizing the Police Chief and Commission on the operation of the Police Department. One issue related to spending \$30,000 on a new sign for the Safety Center. The most outspoken matter was disciplining a very popular school resource police officer. A number of disciplinary issues occurred, with the eventual discharge of this officer. Other former officers have come forward to criticize the chief and commission. What must be understood is that the Commissioners have personnel information about problems with these former employees that cannot be made public due to privacy issues. A third issue is department turnover. Some say that it is very high, but at an average of 10% a year for the past several years, it is about the State average. During the HEDC's business visitation program we ask local businesses about their experience in dealing with town departments. The Police Department receives the most positive comments.

The small activist group wants the chief fired. Some have called for increasing the number of commissioners, perhaps gaining a majority willing to fire the chief, or if this fails, abolishing the Commission altogether. Some Town Councilors may be on board with this strategy. This is not the proper way to handle personnel matters.

Three Commissioners has worked well for Hooksett for the past 30 years. We already have three people supervising only one person (Chief). We do not need to expand local government and expense by increasing it to five. I am told that there is only one community in NH that has more than three police commissioners, and that is the City of Manchester. I'm reminded of my former employer that is governed by the NH Public Utilities Commission. That 3-person Commission not only is responsible for a large internal staff, but also for all gas, electric, telephone, water and other companies operating in NH. Why do we need five police commissioners to supervise one person in small town police department? In addition to expanding local government and expense, this could have the undesirable result of creating situations where the public is excluded. With three commissioners no two can meet privately to discuss police matters, since two represents a quorum, and a requirement to publically post the meeting. With five commissioners, any combination of two can meet privately without public notification. Commissioners 1 and 2 could meet, then 2 and 3, 3 and 4 and so on. A deal could be easily cooked in private.

Lastly, what happens if folks are unhappy with 5 commissioners? Will they be back here again to increase the number to 6, 7, 9 ???

Thank you for your time. I'll be happy to answer any questions that you may have.