

OLD SAYBROOK POLICE COMMISSION
Special Meeting
January 15, 2012
MINUTES

A special meeting of the Old Saybrook Police Commission was held on Tuesday, January 15, 2012, at the Old Saybrook Town Hall.

Present: Chairman Burnham, Vice Chairman Metsack, Commissioners Sparaco, Finch and Stuart were also present. Chief Spera and Lieutenant Roche were also present from the Department of Police Services.

I. Call to Order/Pledge of Allegiance

Chairman Burnham called the meeting to order at 7:05PM

Chairman Burnham attempted to call Commissioner Dunlap so he could participate by phone. He was not available.

II. Comments from the Public

A member of the public apologized for not being as polite as he should have been with his comments at the previous meeting. The citizen continued in saying that School Resource Officers are in school for more than security but can also prevent bullying and dissuade kids from bringing weapons into school. School Resource Officers also provide the students with someone to talk to regarding personal or family related problems. The citizen concluded that Chief Spera's budget proposal would be at a bare minimum to tax payers and the cost is worth having a fantastic police force, not just an adequate police force.

A member of the public expressed that he was disappointed that Chief Spera's proposal was voted down and that the safety of the town's children should be everyone's number one priority. This citizen urged the Commission to find a way to approve the Chief's request regardless of politics and personal feelings.

A member of the public thanked the parents and families in attendance for supporting the Chief's proposal to reinstate the SRO program to a full time program. This citizen expressed extreme disappointment and anger in saying that it was the Commission's job to protect her children while they are in school. She concluded that the Commission had not acted in the best interest of the town and she asked the Commission to reconsider their vote on adding Officers 26 and 27.

A member of the public stated that we live in a different world than when she was a child and today's world requires more security for children. She expressed that Newtown is a small community very similar to Old Saybrook and that their school had top of the line security measures in place but no School Resource Officer in the building. She urged the members of the Commission to think like parents and restore the School Resource Officer program to full time.

A member of the public with a career as a first responder claimed that nothing has changed from a month ago when it was deemed that the schools needed a full time School Resource Officer. He continued that he understood the Commission has a fiscal responsibility but he claimed that the tax increase was one that the town's citizens were ready to accept. The citizen also insinuated that members of the Commission were denying the Chief's requests for personal reasons. The citizen explained that for every \$1,000 increase the tax payer would have to pay \$0.18 based on the valuation of their home. He continued that if your home was valued at \$200,000 then the Chief's budget increase would cost an additional \$36

per year. If you own a \$500,000 home then the Chief's proposed budget increase would cost \$90 per year. The citizen concluded that this tax increase is reasonable and one worth paying for the safety of the community's children.

An NRA Representative said that Old Saybrook and Newtown are very similar communities. The representative claimed that politicians pass gun laws that are mostly ineffective at preventing gun crime. He added that our celebrities and our politicians have armed guards. He also noted that our money has armed guards at banks. Therefore, he concluded that our children should have armed guards as well stating that the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is with a good with a gun. He clarified that in this instance the good guy is a trained police officer.

A member of the public reminded the Commission that the Chief was willing to forgo some of his support services in an effort to add police officers. The citizen continued that this shows how highly the Chief prioritizes the School Resource Officer program. The citizen concluded that the Chief was hired to do a job and is now telling the community what he needs to do that job so the Commission should trust his judgment and honor his request.

A member of the public, also a principal at another Connecticut High School, proclaimed that he has spent a lot of time thinking about what he would do if a violent intruder came into his school. He claimed that he would go through all of the necessary safety protocols but ultimately would be forced to wait 5 to 10 minutes for a state trooper to arrive. He added that in Old Saybrook it might only take 2 or 3 minutes for an officer to arrive on the scene but if the officer was in school it would only take 30 seconds, which could be the difference in saving several lives. The citizen concluded that he discussed his school's security measures with a member of the Connecticut SWAT team and the one thing he recommended be done differently is that the school should have a trained police officer in the building.

A member of the public urged the Commission to reconsider the Chief's request. The citizen then urged the community to unite and force a referendum if the Commission does not change its vote.

A member of the public stated that she is all for protecting children but she is not sure that having an armed guard in the schools is the best solution. She further explained that she does not want her children to feel like they are going to school in a prison and that having armed police officers in school might be stripping children of their innocence.

A member of the public who has worked in the mental health world for 35 years claimed that police officer presence is more important than ever because of the number of mentally ill patients that are being released from mental hospitals into the surrounding communities. She concluded that every town needs to be prepared to protect its community from the dangers of the world, which means having an increased police presence.

A member of the public stated that School Resource Officers are not looked upon by children as armed guards but as friends. This member of the public praised Officer Kiako and the other SRO's for the work that they do. She continued that her kids are treated very well by the officers and they make her feel like her children are safe at school. She concluded that no one questions their child's safety when an officer is in school and the children don't question why the officer is there. The children enjoy the School Resource Officers not just for the safety they provide but because they are one more adult that the kids can trust and turn to in times of need.

2013-2014 Budget Proposal Update from the Chief of Police

Chief Spera thanked everyone for attending the meeting and stated that he is committed to developing a policing strategy that the town supports.

Chief Spera walked the Commission through the updated budget documents and reviewed all the items that were voted on at the previous meeting. As it stands, the currently approved operating budget total is \$3,055,161.

Chief Spera said that the public turnout, though appreciated, and the events at Newtown did not influence his decision to request additional officers and restore the SRO program to full time status. Chief Spera continued that the workshops presented to the Police Commission explained the benefits of the School Resource Program and the need for additional Patrolmen. Chief Spera concluded that he has shown the Commission through presentations, models and formulas why the Department needs additional officers and he urged them to reconsider their vote on creating sworn positions number 26 and 27 to allow these new officers to backfill senior officers who will serve as School Resource Officers. He reiterated that should they approve these positions, he will assign a certified School Resource Officer to each public school on a full time basis.

III. Discussion and ACTION pertaining to the Proposed 2013-2014 Operating Budget

Chairman Burnham asked the Chief if the new documents provided an accurate look at the budget as it was previously voted on.

Chief Spera replied that the documents were reviewed in great detail by himself and the new Finance Director and that he had great confidence in the updated budget documents.

Chairman Burnham asked the Chief to further explain his proposal to forgo the support services that were approved in exchange for an additional police officer.

Chief Spera replied that he would first ask the Commission to simply reconsider officers 26 and 27 in addition to what has already been approved. Should that fail, the Chief asked that any of the money allocated towards Support Services be used to improve the School Resource Officer program instead.

Vice Chairman Metsack explained that every workshop explained to the Commission the importance of their position and the need for additional officers. He concluded that it would be irresponsible to not meet their request.

Commissioner Stuart stated that it was not long ago the Department had 24 officers and 3 School Resource Officers. Commissioner Stuart feels that if this was possible once, it could be done again with the current staff.

Vice Chairman Metsack responded that the Commission had been informed during the Professional Development workshop about the various regulations created by POST and others that demonstrate that the policing world has changed dramatically in the last five years, with cases becoming more complex and paperwork being more detailed.

Chairman Burnham agreed with Vice Chairman Metsack saying that things have changed a lot, especially when it comes to juveniles. Additionally, the juvenile age has been raised to 18 years old, which means you have expanded the pool of juveniles and increased the complexity of dealing with this pool. Chairman Burnham concluded that the officers who conducted the workshops explained all the responsibilities that they were struggling to complete and the responsibilities that they were no longer doing because they didn't have time to complete those responsibilities. She added that it was the Commission's responsibility to get the budget to the next level with the resources that the Department needs.

Commissioner Finch remarked that the support services already approved by the Commission would free up hours equivalent to roughly 2.5 or 3 officers. Commissioner Finch added that by civilianizing certain responsibilities and adding more than 100 hours of support personnel, there should be more time available to allocate to the School Resource Officer Program. Commissioner Finch also noted that there are multiple daycares in town and he rhetorically asked if these facilities should have armed guards as well.

Chief Spera replied that the support personnel that had been approved would help streamline the Department and make Department functions more efficient, but these additional hours would not free up much time for sworn officers. For example, the civilian assigned to Criminal Investigations would allow for sworn Detectives to perform more Detective related work rather than clerical work that could be performed by this civilian. This would increase efficiency and bring the Criminal Investigations Division closer to becoming more proactive than reactive, which is the Chief's desire.

Commissioner Finch asked how this was possible.

Chairman Burnham replied that even though Sergeant Gardner works IT full time, the position is backfilled at the expense of the town hall IT budget. Making the IT Director a civilian position only gives the Department 3 additional days per week.

Commissioner Stuart said that Chief Spera had previously stated that Sergeants do Sergeant duties and Patrolmen do Patrolmen duties so how is it possible for a Patrolman to backfill Sergeant Gardner's position.

Chief Spera responded that while this statement is true, that Sergeants are assigned Sergeant and/or supervisory duties, Sergeant Gardner's position as the Information Technology Director is unique as a resolution endorsed by the Police Commission and the Board of Selectman specially outlines what his duties are. The Chief mentioned that as he stated at the past meeting, often times to save money he is assigning a Master Sergeant to backfill a Patrol Sergeant position, which takes the Master Sergeant away from administrative assignments. Therefore, when additional staffing is needed on these types of shifts, a less expensive Patrolman is used to backfill a vacancy rather than a Sergeant.

Chief Spera stated that in the past the Commissioner has always hired a new Patrolman to backfill the creation of a new School Resource Officer. Chief Spera cited a report to the Police Commission written by then Patrolman Stuart about the importance of the School Resource Officer and the benefits that the position provides. The Chief began to cite past Police Commission minutes that discussed the creation of new sworn positions to backfill senior officers who would then become School Resource Officers. He stated that this has happened twice in the Department's history and that the second SRO position was added due to the benefits that the community, especially the youth, yielded from the program. The Chief stated that unfortunately the positions that were added in the past were eventually eliminated when the town chose to lay off four police officers. Chief Spera concluded that he is dedicated to enhancing the SRO program because of all the stated benefits to the community but the only way the program can return to full time status is if two new officers are hired to backfill those positions.

Commissioner Stuart asked how many officers the Department had in 2001.

Chief Spera replied that he believed there were 24 officers in 2001.

Commissioner Stuart stated in 2001 there were 24 officers with 2 SRO's with officers writing 3,105 citations that year. Now there are 25 officers 0 full time SRO's with officers writing 4,450 citations in 2012. Commissioner Stuart concluded that the increase in citations means that officers have more free time and with one more officer than in 2001, there should be adequate staff to enhance the SRO program.

Chief Spera replied that he disagreed with Commissioner Stuart's assessment.

Chief Spera stated that the purpose of the Department is not to write citations but to respond to incidents and police the service population, while generating volunteer compliance to the laws. In 2001 there were 15,961 incidents and last year there were 23,285. Additionally, a traffic study showed 20,200 cars traveled on one road in Old Saybrook in a 24 hour period. Chief Spera added that local businesses are among the busiest in the state and

investigations are much more complex and time consuming than they were in 2001. Chief Spera concluded that he pushes his staff to the limit and he is proud of the work they do on a daily basis but there is a limit to what he can ask them to do. Chief Spera stated that the SRO Program that was in place prior to the tragedy in Newtown would remain in place next fiscal year if the Board of Education still welcomed the program and there were no additional cuts to Police personnel. He reminded the Commission that this level of staffing is two officers spending half of their time each week amongst three public schools and three private schools. He stated again that the only way to have three full time SRO's in the school and properly staff the Patrol and Criminal Investigation Divisions is to hire two new officers that would backfill senior officers to serve as School Resource Officers.

Chairman Burnham asked Chief Spera if he could explain how the SRO program worked prior to Newtown and how it will operate for the rest of the school year.

Chief Spera replied that Patrolman Walsh and Patrolman Kiako spend half of their time as an SRO and half of their time as Patrolmen. Currently, the two detectives have been pulled from their normal Criminal Investigation duties to serve as temporary School Resource Officers. Chief Spera noted, however, that this solution is not permanent as the victims of crimes that are not being investigated deserve to have their cases analyzed by the Detectives. Chief Spera added that the schools have asked that an officer remain in the schools until February break. Chief Spera concluded that he will be submitting a proposal to the Commission at the next regular meeting that will allow one officer to stay in the schools until the end of the school year.

Vice Chairman Metsack moved to reinstate officer 26 and officer 27 to the already approved budget. Chairman Burnham seconded the motion. The motion was defeated with a vote of 2 in favor and 3 against, with Commissioners Finch, Stuart and Sparaco dissenting.

Commissioner Stuart made a motion that the Police Commission sends \$3,055,161, which is the operating budget that was approved at the previous meeting, to the Board of Selectman. Commissioner Sparaco seconded the motion. The motion passed with a vote of 4 in favor and 1 against, with Chairman Burnham dissenting.

Commissioner Finch made a motion to send Capital Budget of \$135,000 to the Board of Selectman. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Stuart. The motion passed with a vote of 5 in favor and 0 against.

IV. Comments from the Public

Michael Paradise, a Dispatcher for the Old Saybrook Police Department, stated the Commission is doing itself a disservice by not providing everything the Department needs. He concluded that hopefully in the future the Commission can make the changes the community asks for.

A member of the public stated that she was disappointed with the Commission's decision and that she did not believe the Chief would ask for resources that he did not need. She continued that the kids love having the cops in school as friends, not as armed guards. She concluded that the Chief listened to the concerns of the public and asked these resources because he knew it was what the community wanted.

A member of the public provided his email address, saybrooker@gmail.com, so that parents could organize against the Commission's decision.

A member of the public accused Commissioners Stuart and Finch of acting selfishly. She claimed that the town had laid out their concerns and that they had failed to hear their request. She said that both men had used the term "adequate" to describe the current police force but that the town wants a Department that is better than adequate because adequate

isn't good enough. She concluded that neither man could claim they supported the SRO program and not back up their support with an affirmative vote for the program.

A member of the public stated that he understands everyone has their own reasons for voting but he pleaded with the Commission that the SRO program is something the community wants and needs. He also claimed he would be willing to pay extra for the program.

A member of the public accused the Commission of playing politics with his children's safety. He added that he would be willing to work more shifts and pay for other people's share of the increase if it meant providing SRO's in the schools full time. He concluded that the the Commission should trust the Chief to do his job and honor his request. He concluded by thanking the men and women of the Police Department for their hard work and urged the parents to organize against the Commission's decision.

A member of the public said that it was ridiculous to look at what worked in previous years to make a current budget. He also claimed that this is a program he was willing to pay extra for and would also pay other people's share of the increase if they could not afford it. He concluded by saying that the Commission's vote weakened the town.

Heather McNeil, Director of Old Saybrook Youth and Family Services, said that when the SRO's are present there is a stronger relationship between the community and the police force. She added that these officers not only enhance school safety but help instruct our children on positive community programs such as anti-bullying and the dangers of drug use.

V. Adjournment

Vice Chairman Metsack made a motion to adjourn. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Sparaco. The motion to adjourn the meeting passed with a vote of 5 in favor and 0 against.

The next regular Police Commission meeting is scheduled for January 28, 2013 at 7:00 p.m. in the First Floor Conference Room, Old Saybrook Town Hall.

The meeting minutes for January 15, 2013 were prepared and respectfully submitted by:

Trent Gerbers
Records Clerk for the Old Saybrook Police Commission