

South Bethany police demand proper pay from town

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By Laura Walter
Staff Reporter

South Bethany's six fulltime police officers are alleging they have not been paid or promoted as they should be. A June 30 demand letter from the officers centers around promotion issues for some officers and holiday pay for all officers.

"Every officer here is affected, which is why we're all represented," said SBPD Sgt. Lee Davis.

The officers would not publically share their specific demands while the Town is preparing its response, expected by Aug. 11.

"Quite honestly, I'm sorry it got to this point. ... I'm hoping this can all be worked out," Davis said.

Davis said the officers had wanted to resolve the problem with the Town privately, but they began to realize a public action was the only path toward resolution.

The police are being represented by John LaRosa of LaRosa & Associates. The officers are paying those legal expenses, with some assistance from Professional Law Enforcement Association (PLEA). PLEA helps police officers with legal defense "if you're wrongly charged for something, if you're not given a promotion when it's due, if policies and procedures are not being followed ... any time there's any kind of issue, where you're not being treated fairly," said Sgt. Lee Davis.

The Town of South Bethany has 24-hour police coverage. There are 10 total staff, but only the six fulltime officers are involved in this issue. That does not include Chief Troy Crowson, the two administrative assistants or the seasonal parking enforcement officer.

The town council recently agreed to compensate police staff for up to two years of back pay for working holidays. But there are still concerns about staff receiving their paid holidays off.

Town hires attorney

At the July 14 town council meeting, the public repeatedly applauded the police department and opposed outsourcing.

Besides advocating for community policing, the public also had plenty of questions for the council about having hired an attorney on the public dime.

"There's no lawsuit pending right now," said Town Solicitor D. Barrett Edwards IV of Hudson, Jones, Jaywork & Fisher LLC.

After an hour-long executive session on July 14, the council voted to hire law firm Archer & Greiner P.C. to advise them on this legal matter (although there were rumblings that the Town had already consulted with the firm before the vote).

"[The police] sent a demand letter to the Town, so the Town is going to get an employment specialist ... to evaluate the claims to respond to," Edwards explained.

"It's confidential," said Mayor Pat Voveris. "But we're letting you know that we're responding."

When residents expressed frustration that the Town wasn't trying to mediate the problem first, Edwards said this is the proper avenue for doing so. Archer brings special legal expertise, whereas town solicitor Edwards specializes in municipal law.

"I think the purpose of hiring an attorney is to get things worked out," Edwards said. "That's what the motion is for: to hire an attorney to evaluate the claims in order to [respond] to the officers to see what kind of agreement can be reached. ... There's a need to respond to something. This is not something I have a whole lot of expertise in. ... This is a specialized area of law."

Archer's hourly rate is \$265, and Town expenditures are always public. The public may track the total costs by submitting Freedom of Information Act requests for invoices or billing documents.

"We're all hopeful that no lawsuit comes out of this ... that some agreement can be reached," Edwards said. "I can't emphasize enough, we're at the very, very beginning stages of this."

Rumors of outsourcing have not come to fruition

The town council has not voted to or even discussed hiring outside contracted police officers, as some towns have (for instance, Millville, which lacks its own police department, hires Delaware State Police officers to specifically patrol town limits for about 20 hours each week).

The council has had little public discussion about the specific state of employment at the police department, although they have hired consultants for a review of police costs.

According to June meeting minutes, "Councilmember [Tim] Saxton said, due to the rising costs over the last few years within the Police Department budget, it is time to take a fresh look to see if there are ways within the Police Department operation to include efficiencies that would help reduce the budget. The goal is to save on long-term expenses."

Two professional reviews are currently under way regarding the police department.

Greg Warren was hired to assess compensation, incentives and promotion policy. The ICMA Center for Public Safety Management (ICMA/CPSM) was also recently hired to study the police department operation, policies and procedures.

Warren also provided initial guidance for the proposed police building expansion. The council hired ICMA/CPSM for more of a managerial perspective and squad analysis.