

# Acton Police Department

## InterDepartmental Memo

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**From:** Frank J. Widmayer, Chief of Police

**Date:** February 26, 2004

**To:** Don Johnson, Town Manager

**Subj:** Supplemental Budget Cuts

WE HAVE ASKED FRANK  
TO COME IN ABOUT 8:00 PM  
TO GIVE THE BOARD A CHANCE  
TO DEAL WITH THE TIMED APPOINTMENTS.

At the budget meeting of January 9<sup>th</sup> I specifically laid out the problems with the budget cuts in front of both boards. I won't revisit those arguments since you are already aware of them. Obviously this is my opinion only and you are free to do as you wish but I would ask that you reconsider your stance on the clerical position. It has been and remains my top priority for funding. I will address some of the points that you made in your memos to the Board of Selectmen.

Police officers are necessary at a moment's notice. I can't afford to stack emergency calls. I base our patrol areas on activity levels, population and geographic size. The reason I asked for two police officers is because I see the need for them based on the services we provide. Yes, we received two police officers through the COPS grant but they are specifically provided to the schools and spend all of their time on either school activities or on investigations related to school age children. They are helpful to the department because they are available after hours for fill-in coverage on regular patrol shifts and it increases the pool of personnel available to us in emergency situations. One of the major problems we face every year is the shortage of personnel due to injury and hiring delays. We are consistently short in the range of two to five officers out of the 33 officers authorized. This count of 33 includes the two school resource officers hired under the grant. Currently the department is short by three officers and soon it will go to four because an officer is pregnant.

Over the years I have tried to add police officers to regular positions because I have felt that if I could get to an adequate number of officers on duty we would be able to rely less on overtime funding. Any officers that I have added did not result in an increase to the overtime account for that reason. Does it always work out? No, because we are still understaffed and can't fill the positions we have open for various reasons. The department has been significantly understaffed for many years and I am trying to rectify that problem.

The position under discussion in clerical is just that, a records clerk. It seems that some may have the impression that I have two personal secretaries. In fact the truth is far from that. I agree that the fact that both of them sit outside my office makes it look that way but I had nowhere else to put them. I tried to knock out some walls years ago and put the clerk at the front entrance but the building commissioner wouldn't allow it unless I hired

# Acton Police Department

## InterDepartmental Memo

an architect. I type my own memos and reports and answer my own phone calls as soon as the dispatcher puts them through. Dispatchers do not screen calls except to see who should handle certain functions such as firearms license renewals, accounts payable, alarm billing, complaints, etc. Then they know the right place to direct the caller. The callers have many more reasons to call here than other town departments especially for things such as directions, animal calls, legal questions, neighbor problems, school closings, tow services, operating hours of other town departments, etc. The police department has had a full-time confidential secretary since the 1960's. The work load is vastly different now than it was then.

Ours is the department of last resort and the only one that handles questions after business hours. We have voice mail capability now but I have hesitated to implement it as the initial response when dispatchers are available. That is because even though some phone lines are designated as non-emergency we frequently get emergency calls on them. For example, last year 1,502 calls were received from people reporting suspicious activity. Most of those calls would have come in on non-emergency lines although they certainly could qualify as 911 calls. In fact the clerical staff is constantly interrupted during the day by walk-ins and phone calls for records. All of the office staff is constantly interrupted and they have to put callers on hold as they juggle several tasks at once. There are also the needs of almost 40 employees who have questions or need something done by the secretary or the clerk. We write over 3,000 citations per year, receive 4,000 911 calls, investigate over 700 m/v crashes, generate 3,000 officer typed reports and many other pieces of paper that citizens invariably want copies of at a moment's notice. We have ten days in which to provide that response. In total we logged over 25,000 incidents last year in our computer system. Add to the work load - payroll, accounts payable, alarm billing and subsequent collection, detail billing, grant record keeping requirements and you easily get beyond the capabilities of one clerk and one secretary. Our department operates 24 hours a day and seven days a week. Officers are generating plenty of paperwork when there are no clerical employees around on nights or weekends. All of this builds up until one of the two clerical staff can get to it.

I was unaware that having a clerk at the Dispatch Task Force meetings for approximately one hour per month was perceived as luxurious. I will stop that immediately now that it has been pointed out. One of the reasons I had thought it was useful in addition to helping me keep track of the complex issues under discussion is that during Incident Command Training courses on Critical Incident Response, the instructors specify the need for civilians to accompany supervisors and keep detailed reports on activities, staffing levels and command decisions. I thought this was good practice towards that function and it was the only meeting where those services were used.

Cruisers are important to the operation and while I have told you in conversation that the rotation plan is failing, it apparently left you with the wrong impression. The cruiser plan is failing because we are keeping the marked cruisers too long and therefore making them

# Acton Police Department

## InterDepartmental Memo

worthless as unmarked cars. That is why I suggested the unmarked car leasing program because it makes sense fiscally due to the eight or nine years we can keep them if they are purchased new. In the five car unmarked lease program I requested, one car was for you and one for me since both of our cars are now nine and eight years old respectively. Since that discussion I have removed use of a car from the court prosecutor and we use mine as a pool car when needed. My cruiser is the one that spent 28 days in the shop recently due to the difficulty of finding parts. We still need three unmarked cars because the two marked cruisers parked at the highway department are not worth converting and the next marked cars to come off line are also not in good shape. Whether funding comes from the police or the highway department budget it is not cost effective to put engines and transmissions in old cruisers that are in the 100k mileage range. After that expense we still have to pay for painting and installation of some equipment.

Here are some of the reasons the clerk position is so important to me and I think benefits the town citizenry in general:

It takes a lot of time to generate the paperwork that people request every day and most of it has to be redacted. That requires work by me, a Lieutenant and either one of the two clerical staff. I hate to think of the time spent on one pistol permit or Firearms ID card now that the state has changed the law so significantly. Add to that the new sex offender registry requirements and the controversy that law generates among the public. You should see the reaction we get when we ask people to wait for us to give them that information. The clerk position is filled by someone with a degree in criminal justice who speaks Spanish, has been here three years and knows the payroll and accounting systems. During the day the clerk or secretary is used for matron services for female prisoners and then used on a call-back basis after hours. Regardless of the personal qualifications of the particular individual there is a clear need for two clerical staff. In fact if you look at the Westford Police Department, a town with the same population as Acton, they have three secretaries and one records clerk.

If given the choice I would allocate whatever funds are available from the \$68,000 in the following order:

1. \$46,409.07 to the records clerk position.
2. \$21,590.90 to the substitute pay.
3. \$0.00 to the cruiser funding.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.



Frank J. Widmayer

Chief of Police