



Committee on City Services and the Northampton City Council

Committee Members:

Chair: Councilor Maureen T. Carney

Vice-Chair: Councilor Marianne L. LaBarge

Councilor Dennis P. Bidwell

Councilor James Nash

Meeting Minutes

Date: January 7, 2019, 4 p.m.

Location: City Council Chambers

212 Main St., Northampton, Massachusetts

Present: Councilor Maureen T. Carney, Chair
Councilor Marianne L. LaBarge, Vice Chair
Councilor Dennis P. Bidwell
Councilor James Nash

1. MEETING CALLED TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

At 4 p.m., Councilor Carney called the meeting to order. On a roll call, Councilors Bidwell, Carney, LaBarge and Nash were present.

Also present: Police Chief Jody Kasper

2. PUBLIC COMMENT

There being no members of the public present, there was no public comment.

3. MINUTES OF DECEMBER 3, 2018

Councilor LaBarge moved to approve the minutes of December 3, 2018. Councilor Bidwell seconded. The motion carried 4:0.

4. POLICE DEPARTMENT/PUBLIC SAFETY UPDATE

Chief Kasper updated members on public safety activities. The most notable issue is the continual challenge the department faces around staffing, she shared. Unemployment is at a 30-year low and there is a police shortage nationwide. As possible reasons, she cited the fact that there are a lot more jobs out there than before - including jobs in the private sector - the fact that the job does not have a lot of flexibility; also, the danger factor and change in the way police are publicly perceived. They have a lot less people applying for jobs. Some councilors have sat in on hiring interviews, and candidates are different than they used to be. They don't come with experience or a degree in the field, and it is challenging to identify those who are going to be a good fit because they haven't worked in the field yet. Applicants may think they are going to like it but find out it is not a good fit.

The city invests a lot in training. For policing, candidates are hired, then sent to a five- to six-month academy followed by additional training in the field. The department had a couple of officers leave in October/November of 2018. Since they don't have an academy until June, new officers won't be on the street to fill the vacancies until April/May of 2020.

Also, although the department is staffed for 65, only 50 of those are uniformed officers. Of the 50, five are assigned to the detective bureau, one is in the schools and one is in an IT function, so only 43 are police officers in uniform assigned to working the street.

Chief Kasper passed out a chart illustrating the number of vacancies (shown in black) and officers either in the academy (shown in green) or field training (yellow). Even though they have 50 positions assigned to the street, 12 of those positions are either vacant or otherwise not working. September was very bad with only 38 officers on the street.

Also, this year, they had 800 hours of forced holdover. This has an impact on burnout and morale; also on safety as someone expecting to work eight hours is not always prepared to work longer. Administrators are looking at this to try to figure out what they can do to better manage their staff. They had a lot of injuries on and off duty this year.

In October, there were no more vacancies because the academy started and they were able to fill those positions. In December, the number in the academy dropped from five to four because someone dropped out of the academy. Employees are classified as student officers while in training.

People are coming to them not as physically fit as they used to be, she added. She noted that this is not just a subjective observation but is borne out by the fact that candidates are not doing as well on the fitness test. The department has lost some during the academy on physical fitness grounds when they weren't able to meet physical activity requirements. They have now established a preliminary test for the academy to keep candidates from being disqualified by the fitness requirements, she related.

Councilor LaBarge commented that she heard this for years from Chief Sienkiewicz.

Chief Kasper held up a chart showing the reasons for separation from employment, including retirement and leaving for other police agencies. In 2017, the department lost three officers to the state police. In 2018, they lost eight, including four to other departments, including Greenfield, Belchertown and Wilbraham.

Every other surrounding community pays more than Northampton, Chief Kasper noted. Northampton's top step is \$55,059, while Amherst's top step is \$61,054 and Belchertown's is \$61,970. It is frustrating to lose people to other municipalities because the city invests a lot of time in training.

Councilor Carney pointed out that they now have a criminal justice program at Smith Vocational School. The police department is linked up with it, but a lot of the students don't actually want to be police officers, they want to be parole officers, military, etc., Chief Kasper advised.

They don't have a lot of Northampton residents applying for positions.

Councilor LaBarge asked what the Mayor says about the pay differential, and Councilor Bidwell asked what has been done in recent years to bolster recruitment.

They have changed the hiring process to eliminate the written test implemented in the past by Chief Sienkiewicz, Chief Kasper advised. (The civil service requirement was eliminated in 2005, she reminded.) The written test was helpful but it was limiting because if someone wonderful walked in the door they couldn't touch him or her if he or she hadn't taken the test. Since an associate degree is required, they felt that having a degree satisfied minimum standards.

They are looking for different officers in their community, particularly those with "the guardian mindset," she acknowledged. They are "absolutely not" getting the critical mass of applicants needed, she concluded.

OPIOID UPDATE

The DART (Drug Addiction Response Team) program has grown from three to seven officers, Chief Kasper reported. Police don't just do follow-up on their own; they partner with recovery coaches who are often recovered addicts themselves.

In 2017, Northampton had four suspected overdoses while in 2018, there were 10 as of the end of November, she said. Northampton has the highest incidence of overdoses in Hampshire and Franklin counties; the next highest being Belchertown and Easthampton with six suspected overdoses in that time period.

She voiced her perception that the stigma around addiction has been reduced and that they've had a really positive impact on that. Another response to the epidemic includes getting more Narcan into the hands of bystanders. Police officers carry it routinely, she confirmed. The thing that has changed about heroin is that it used to be heroin, and now it's mostly Fentanyl.

Councilor Nash asked if the NPD tracks how often Narcan is administered, and Chief Kasper said yes. The exact figure is on the open data portal but a rough estimate would be 30 to 35 times.

Councilor Nash noted that these represent people who could have od'd but were resuscitated.

HATE CRIMES

She serves on the governor's Hate Crimes Task Force, Chief Kasper advised. The task force made a few recommendations, i.e. - adopting the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP's) model policy on hate crimes, designating a civil rights officer and using the national reporting system to report hate crimes, and the NPD has implemented them all.

The Municipal Police Training Committee (MPTC) is tasked with putting together training for civil rights officers. Ideally, someone in all 351 communities would attend.

The incidence of hate crimes ranges between one and four or five in a year – on the open data portal, visitors can see details of the incident; i.e. a swastika painted on a wall.

NETA OPENING

She has had a lot of contact with NETA, Chief Kasper confirmed. The biggest issue is parking. Police get the most complaints from Wright Avenue, and there are still a lot of problems there on private lots. Pro Lube and the doctor's office have had to privately tow vehicles. Wright Avenue is a struggle and she plans to meet with the DPW director to discuss it. The street was changed after it was paved to be seven or eight feet narrower. With the narrower width, it is challenging to have parking on both sides. The city has allowed parking on the right side of Pleasant Street but vehicles have sometimes blocked a PVTA bus stop there. Pedestrians are unexpected on Conz Street, so the added pedestrian traffic creates a hazard, she acknowledged. NETA has worked out private arrangements with the Gazette and the Department of Public Health (DPH) to lease parking spaces on their properties; however, people are also parking in the bowling alley and hotel parking lot [without permission]. The area is not used to that many pedestrians down there.

Councilor LaBarge related that at the Rotary Club meeting, one of the Wright Street residents said that it's awful; her car has gotten hit and another car has gotten hit.

"That's true," Chief Kasper conceded, noting she's heard the same. Parking Enforcement Administrator Nanci Forestall has been receiving calls and has been sending parking enforcement officers.

Councilor Carney asked if the chief had a sense of what percentage of patrons are from out of town, and Chief Kasper said she would love to have that data. She would guess that it is the majority based on the license plates she has seen. NETA must have this information since they collect driver's licenses, Councilor Bidwell noted.

Councilor Carney wondered if there is increased occupancy at the Fairfield Inn, and Chief Kasper said she has heard anecdotally that this is the case.

Overtime, they expect congestion and traffic to dissipate, Councilor Bidwell observed. They could have as many as four or five retail outlets opening on Main Street, Pearl Street and Pleasant Street, he pointed out. Given what they've seen at this location, he asked what the planning is for possible parking issues at these locations.

Dissipation is what they are hoping for, Chief Kasper responded. They think other potential locations will be more foot-traffic oriented.

They have had zero significant incidents; no criminal incidents and no OUI arrests, she reported. They do expect to see that tick up over time as that has been the experience in other communities. They [already] have a lot of impaired operators in the community, she noted, citing 85 reported OUI's in a recent time period. Police have been tracking OUI's and OUI drugs since medical marijuana was introduced and just started tracking whether marijuana was involved in a drinking OUI (based on whether marijuana was in the car or there was admitted use). The ratio of alcohol-impaired to marijuana-impaired driving is 80:5, she said.

Councilor Nash thanked the chief and entire department for the terrific work they have done around the NETA opening in controlling traffic and parking. "I want to thank you for being so responsive," he remarked.

Three traffic officers are assigned there every day and security is on site overnight, Chief Kasper confirmed.

He did a little survey on Wright Avenue and discovered that, of 19 cars parked on the street, 15, or 79%, had out of state license plates, Councilor Nash shared. He appreciates that the city is allowing parking on Pleasant Street. He has had complaints about that from people who say it is creating traffic, but his response is that it is also slowing down traffic. It is traffic calming, he suggested.

When asked about people using marijuana in their vehicles after purchase, Chief Kasper said police have heard anecdotal reports of this but have not witnessed it.

This week, lines are way down, Councilor Nash observed. The holidays are over and New Year's is over, so he is expecting to see a change, he added. The location right off the highway is ideal, members noted. NETA has provided signage on Wright Avenue at its own expense.

SEASONAL ACTIVITIES

The only thing notable is that police are making the recommendation for next year not to have the Hot Chocolate Run and holiday stroll on the same weekend, Chief Kasper related. The run takes about 20 officers and the stroll takes a number too, so it is too much for the department. Other than that, all seasonal events went very well. It was raining and cold for the run so that affected turnout.

First Night went well. Sgt. Barszcz estimated 2,000 people attended. Normally, they have 8 to 10,000.

Councilor Bidwell asked the chief to talk more about department morale, since the Mayor told them this was cited as an issue.

She just met with union leadership from the patrol union, Chief Kasper reported. Pay is an issue and work load is an issue. Last year, the department went through a rocky time with a highly visible internal affairs matter. It was hard internally; it divided people. It was tough for the department and they have not fully recovered. As councilors probably saw, there was an arbitration award. As she mentioned in her e-mail, there is an anti-police feeling both nationally and locally. People want to work in a place where they feel they're wanted. She expressed her belief that it is small number of people that drive the anti-police narrative in this community. Someone yelled an obscenity at her as she was on her way here today, she said. She related an incident of another officer who was verbally abused, concluding that, while there is a lot of support in the community, there is a higher level of aggressive, antipolice activity going on.

"Respect seems to have been lost," she observed.

Councilor LaBarge asked what they could do as councilors to help.

Chief Kasper did not offer an immediate answer. "We feel that we're a responsive department; we're a department that listens," she commented, but they still get a lot of that kind of aggressive, disrespectful language. Department members are already dealing with difficult situations and get negative reactions from the community as well.

Councilor Carney said she thinks policing is still understood by most people to be a highly-respected profession.

The more she talks to teachers and others in public service, the more she finds they're experiencing similar issues, Chief Kasper added. The way kids talk to adults is different than in the past, she noted.

Councilor Bidwell asked if actions taken by the City Council filter through and have an impact, and Chief Kasper said yes. There have been a few issues that have come up that she has talked to council leadership about. It has an impact, she confirmed.

"I do recognize your support in many areas," but it has been more difficult for her and her staff to understand some of the processes, she volunteered. One of the thing that came up in discussion is really improving communication. Direct communication instead of communicating in a public forum is very helpful, she suggested.

Councilor Nash said he couldn't agree more. He expressed the opinion that they should have the opportunity to have a discussion that doesn't revolve around bullets or an appropriation for tactical equipment. He asked if the list of activities mentioned by Laurie Loisel in her public comment before the City Council last Thursday is on the website somewhere as he would like to be able to point to those trainings.

The open data portal includes a list of trainings which is updated every year in February/March.

Councilor Nash encouraged anyone who hasn't already done so to attend the citizen's academy hosted regularly by the department.

The open data portal is tremendously valuable information, Councilor Bidwell added.

Members thanked Chief Kasper for her report.

5. **ITEMS REFERRED TO COMMITTEE**

A. **18.213 Appointments to Charter Review Committee - referred by City Council - 12/6/2018**

Charter Review Committee:

Robert Boulrice, 127 Hinckley Street, Florence (Ward 5)

Term: January 1, 2019 - December 31, 2019

Sam Hopper, 257 South Street, Northampton (Ward 4)

Term: January 1, 2019 - December 31, 2019

B. **18.220 Appointments to Charter Review Committee - referred by City Council, 12/20/2018**

Charter Review Committee:**Stanley W. Moulton**, 34 Perkins Avenue, Northampton (Ward 1)

Term: January 1, 2019 - December 31, 2019

Roberta Sullivan, 83 Maynard Road, Northampton (Ward 2)

Term: January 1, 2019 - December 31, 2019

Patricia Healy, 21 Longfellow Drive, Florence (Ward 6)

Term: January 1, 2019 - December 31, 2019

Mollie Fox, 24 Water Street, Leeds (Ward 7)

Term: January 1, 2019 - December 31, 2019

They have six appointments to the Charter Review Committee and two more appointments that are not on the agenda because they were just referred Thursday, Councilor Carney recounted. The ordinance specifically dictates how the Charter Review Committee is to be established, which is by appointment of the Mayor in consultation with specific ward councilors. Since that has already happened, her suggestion is that committee members simply ratify the appointments as a group. She offered to entertain a motion to take the appointments as a group with a positive recommendation.

Councilor Bidwell moved to send the names of Robert Boulrice, Sam Hopper, Stan Moulton, Roberta Sullivan, Patricia Healey and Mollie Fox to the City Council with a positive recommendation. Councilor Nash seconded. The motion passed unanimously with 4 Yes, 0 No.

Members agreed to recess the regular City Council meeting briefly on January 17th to make a recommendation on the remaining two appointments so that the full committee could be appointed that evening.

6. NEW BUSINESS

Members discussed plans for the February meeting. The committee has not heard from Fire/EMS in over a year. Mrs. Krutzler offered to extend an invitation through the Mayor's office. Councilor Bidwell suggested that Air bnb's would be a good topic for a future meeting now that the state has passed regulations and discussions are proceeding on how best to regulate them locally.

7. Adjourn

Upon motion made by Councilor LaBarge and seconded by Councilor Nash, the meeting was adjourned at 5:10 p.m.

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