

Selectmen Reject Adding Civilian Dispatchers to Police Dept Through Mid-2019

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Date : February 13, 2018



Four of the five members of the Board of Selectmen on Tuesday rejected a proposal for the Darien Police Department to hire three more civilian dispatchers in the spring of 2019.

As presented to the Board of Selectmen by Town Administrator Kathleen Buch and Police Chief Ray Osborne, the three civilian dispatchers would allow the department to have an officer work primarily on narcotics investigations (as opposed to having various police and detectives work on them off and on) and allow for a school resource officer at Middlesex Middle School.

In her proposed budget to the Board of Selectmen, Buch had cut back on a \$300,000 proposal to hire the three dispatchers at or near the beginning of the next fiscal year. Instead, she proposed hiring them in the last quarter of the fiscal year — starting around March 2019.

Buch said the state budget situation made it seem as if more and more state aid would be cut to the town and taxpayers wouldn't want to pay higher town taxes when state and federal tax bills might be going up. With that as a backdrop, town officials have been calling on significant fiscal restraint at the town level.

Buch told selectmen in recent weeks that the real fiscal burden from hiring dispatchers would come in the 2019-2020 fiscal year, when the full \$300,000 cost for the dispatcher's salary and benefits for an entire fiscal year would kick in.

Members of the Board of Selectmen said on Tuesday that they wanted to restrain spending even more than Buch proposed.

"I'm in favor of basically deferring the choice [to hire dispatchers] until the next fiscal year, not the one

coming up," Kip Koons said. "Right now we're on the cusp of some big [fiscal] changes in Connecticut. I would just be cautious. I would not make that move [to increase spending with three new hires] in this coming fiscal year."

During the discussion, selectmen referred to a communication from Police Chief Ray Osborne discussing what he believes is a need for a member of the police force concentrate on narcotics investigations.

Selectman Pam Sparkman said that the chief appeared to say that about three quarters of police work involving illegal drugs had to do with marijuana. First Selectman Jayme Stevenson said she thought the board needed "more data on that."

At a time when many state lawmakers are suggesting that the state legalize marijuana, having a full-time narcotics officer seems less necessary, Sparkman said.

Selectmen said Tuesday and at a previous meeting that they were disinclined to spend money to make a member of the police force available as a school resource officer at Middlesex when neither the Board of Education, the school district administration or even the principal at Middlesex had come to selectmen to request the new position.

The long-term plan to replace police officers with civilian dispatchers had originated with former Police Chief Duane Lovello, who was replaced by Osborne early last year. Lovello had originally said the police force might be reduced through attrition after the dispatchers were hired.

Osborne told selectmen at a previous meeting that he didn't want to reduce the force, just provide different services (including the narcotics officer and school resource officer) to better meet the needs of the town.

Stevenson said after the meeting that the board was inviting Osborne to discuss with it the amount of work involved in narcotics crimefighting and what resources were being put into it. She said that she, too, was willing to defer hiring more civilian dispatchers until the 2019-2020 fiscal year.

Selectman Marc Thorne was not at Tuesday night's meeting, where no votes were taken. The Board of Selectmen expects to have a final discussion and vote on its proposed budget on Feb. 26.

From there, the budget goes to the Board of Finance, which may make additional changes, and then the Representative Town Meeting for final discussions and a vote to authorize it. The budget would go into effect on July 1.