

Washington County Commissioners

Notes of the meeting January 8, 2018

Focus of the meeting – the escalating rate of crime in Washington County

In attendance: Chris Gardner, Commissioner District II; John B. Crowley, Sr., Commissioner District III; Deputy Tim Mace, Northfield; Billy Milliken, Jonesport; Deputy Tim Tabbutt, Columbia; Joshua Rolfe, Machias Selectman; Clifford Perry, Cherryfield Selectman; Rich Rolfe, Washington County Jail Administrator; Jason Prescott, Machiasport; Lewis Pinkham, Milbridge; Bob Fitzsimmons, Baileyville; Christina Therrien, Machias; Callie Ferguson, Bangor; Jeffrey Lovit, Addison; Mary S. Wylie, South Addison; Marilee Lovit, Addison; Sherie Fraser, DHHS Case Manager; Arthur Tatangelo, Cherryfield; Charley Martin-Berry, East Machias/Community Caring Collaborative; Reid Albee, County-/Wide; Jason _____, Addison; Daniel Crabtree, Eastport; Barry Curtis, Washington County Sheriff; Michael Crabtree, Washington County Chief Deputy; Dave Burns, Whiting; Carlene Holmes, Register of Probate, Lyman Holmes, Probate Judge; Katherine Holmes, East Machias; Dylan Lord, Lubec; Sarah Dedmon, Machiasport/MVNO; Paula Johnson-Rolfe, Sheriff's Office; Ernest James, Charlotte; Kim McClure, East Machias; David Clark, Machias; Mary Angarola, Machias; Warren Gay, Machias; Joe Thompson, Roque Bluffs; Malcolm Holmes, East Machias; Sharon Dean, East Machias; Harper Dean, East Machias; Renee Gray, Lubec and Addison; Stephanie Page, Machias Savings Bank and Lubec; Patrick Whitney, Jonesboro Selectman; Jill Holmes, Washington County Treasurer; Carla Manchester, Washington County Administrative Office; Matt Foster, Washington County District Attorney; Billy Howard, Calais Mayor

Commissioner Gardner welcomed the attendees and explained Commissioner Cassidy's absence.

He said this was not a meeting about drug issues alone, also included are concerns regarding prevention, intervention and treatment. Determining what to do about crime while addressing the drug issue should be the focus. The criminal element has reached Washington County and it is getting out of hand. We don't think we can arrest our way out of the problem. We are starting to see this statewide. No help is coming, we have to do this for ourselves. This meeting is not the first step; we didn't come here first, we've come here last.

The Budget Committee was sympathetic to the Sheriff's request for more resources. They tried to find a compromise between the request for 3-4 new positions and the possible tax increases that would be a result of the additional costs.

Commissioner Crowley agreed that Commissioner Gardner had introduced the subject and covered it well; he is sure we are just seeing the tip of the iceberg. As long as there is a market for drugs, someone is going to take the chance to fill that demand.

Sheriff Curtis spoke next. As a retired state trooper, he saw, once joining the Sheriff's Department, the issues that needed attention. He said the department cannot get ahead, they are going backwards. Needing more manpower, they have tried re-arranging schedules and other ways of utilizing their resources. These are the issues that are plaguing the larger cities; the problem is ahead of us. The Sheriff expressed appreciation to the Border Patrol for their focus on this issue.

The Chief Deputy spoke next. He admitted that there has always been crime in Washington County. What is seen now is the increase in violent crime, i.e. stabbings, shootings and home invasions. What is driving the occurrence of crimes is the drug issue. It is assumed that out-of-state organizations are coming into the county; although there are few statistics available. There are forty-six towns, and the towns are broken into three "slots". Thirty of the forty-six towns have organized drug trafficking; seven drug-focused organizations have a presence here. Last year there were four robberies all year, this year there have been four in the past three months. In the last eight months there have been two homicides, and shootings on the streets of Calais. One of the reasons this is happening is that a drug "pipeline" has been established for heroin, cocaine and crack cocaine.

For a population of almost 35,000, we do not have a lot of cops. We have a shortage of police officers, the Sheriff's Department struggles to find candidates to go to the Academy. We have adjusted the pay scale as best we can; it is difficult to compete with the signing bonuses of an Orono, Old Town or Baileyville. Twenty-one of thirty-one days there was no coverage for an area in the county; but we do help each other out. Starting pay for officers is around \$17.00/hour and that is hard to compete with when the Mill is \$25.00/hour. Baileyville's department just went to full staff yesterday.

The State Police have openings as well. The drug problem is the bigger problem; how we deal with the criminal element while we are dealing with the drug problem is the immediate issue. How do we keep people safe? DA Matt Foster added that what the Sheriff and Chief Deputy are saying is that Washington County does not have a detective as Hancock and Troop J do and that is a critical need.

Other comments:

Chief Bob Fitzsimmons – The Sheriff's Office pays \$16.00 for a 12-hour shift, Baileyville pays \$17.00. It seems that no one wants to be an officer anymore and the current staff are not getting any younger; my youngest officer is thirty. We are seeing things we have never seen before from the criminal element. Heroin is not manufactured in Washington County; it comes via Routes 1 and 9. Other agencies help out (Border Patrol and Marine Patrol), but having one person on a shift is dangerous. The police have to follow rules; the criminals do not.

Chief Lewis Pinkham – Explained he had been in law enforcement as long as the Sheriff and had trained four officers who had all gone to the Sheriff's Department; and Milbridge pays \$23.00/hour. There is a different element out there. One thing that might help us is to hold people more accountable. We catch them and they find it easy to get out.

Malcolm Holmes – We know there is drug activity going on; accountability is key. Why isn't there a drug offender list like the sex offender list? At least it would make it harder to hide. As for the people coming across the state lines, let the feds deal with them; we have to change the laws/legal system.

Senator Dave Burns – there was a bill presented to have a drug offender list created, it didn't go anywhere.

Chief Deputy Crabtree's response – in working with the feds, a 10-Oxycodone pill offense is not a big case. It does not meet the threshold for prosecution.

Calais Mayor Billy Howard – Are we getting our fair share from MDEA? Are we getting the same intel? We need to see more results in order to add more people. We've added three officers here and haven't seen any changes.

Chief Deputy – yes. Intel is the problem – law enforcement is not good at sharing intel. MDEA is shared with Hancock County. The disruption or dismantling of pipelines is necessary.

Commissioner Gardner – the net numbers really have not changed; we have not added officers who are sitting on street corners. The municipalities have not added officers.

Chief Fitzsimmons – the Rule of 10 says that what can be bought in New York City for \$10.00 can be sold here for \$100.00. The chief said he has not been able to figure out where the money is coming from to buy the drugs; that is the missing piece of the puzzle.

Machias Town Manager Christina Therrien – speaking on behalf of herself and not the Selectmen; this is not a dollar issue or an extra officer issue. Towns that do have departments are getting hit double. There needs a creative solution: get people interested, get a detective for Washington County (perhaps share expenses and training costs), organize a small group to work collectively. Machias has been advertising for an officer for over a year and has not had qualified applicants apply.

Commissioner Gardner – the State saw this problem ten years ago; that law enforcement was split into the State plus wages, the County plus wages and the Town plus wages.

Chief Deputy – we do try and share resources. How can we get from what we have - to what we need? No one goes into law enforcement for the money.

Malcolm Holmes – no teeth in the judicial system, there were 70,000 overdoses last year. We need more money and an overall look at the problem.

Jason Prescott – drugs are not all from out-of-state. Everybody knows trust has been lost. Something should be done when a person dies. He recounted a story of a person evicted (Town pressured the landlord); who then peddled his crack at all the drug houses and nothing was done. There has been a loss of confidence in the police.

Chief Deputy – the problem is, one has to be able to prove the allegations. Just because you give information does not mean you are a witness. Everyone makes the personal choice to help.

Sheriff – we need help from the public. We need eyes.

Jonesport Selectman Billy Milliken – We have similar issue in town. We have two articles to contract for a deputy for 160 hours a week. We are budgeting from surplus to fight drug issues in our town at \$100,000 (90% to address; 10% prevention). We are hoping other towns might do something similar. With all the talking in the municipalities, maybe we can come up with a plan and get some traction. We haven't had violent crime in Jonesport but we cannot ignore the issue - \$100,000 isn't going to go far, we are hoping to get some traction and momentum.

Commissioner Gardner – the communities own and manage the business. We are not about asking for money. We are reporting back to the stockholders. The company is not doing well. What do you want to do?

Senator Burns – law enforcement has not kept up well following 9/11. The Governor was persuaded three years ago that the State Police were struggling to keep people. Other departments have suffered from the manpower shortage as well. Christina had the best idea – form a multi-disciplined small group.

Sharon Dean – expressed appreciation for the quick crime-watch group. Security cameras could be used as a deterrent.

Commissioner Gardner – we all have a responsibility to speak up; this will not be solved by anyone acting alone. We all have to do what we can do.

Dillon Lord - from Lubec (former drug user) – More men will not solve this; surrendering my life to God has helped me. Nobody knows why an addict keeps using and getting clean and going back again. My situation: I was using for eighteen years and spending sixteen years trying to get clean. No one can stop these guys from out-of-state. Nobody talks about getting kids not to do drugs. I had DARE – don't lose sight of prevention efforts.

Chief Fitzsimmons – prevention efforts must start with the kids; getting into the schools is important. Parents have to be parents again.

Billy Howard – towns need to address the issues and combine resources. Billy then expressed appreciation to the Border Patrol.

Jason Prescott – we need to make haste. We cannot wait until Gangsters A are fighting with Gangsters B.

Chief Deputy – we are trying to figure out to stop the bleeding right now. It's a crisis.

Deputy Tim Mace – reminding people that very specific details are needed in order to make a case. He suggested a Citizen's Police Academy to which Bob Fitzsimmons responded that it was offered and no one seemed interested.

Charlie Martin-Berry – asked if that response was out of fear and/or frustration and whether people were taking things into their own hands. Not a good idea was the response.

Commissioner Gardner – recounted an event at his house involving a break-in at his barn; he checked it out himself as he knew there might not be coverage. People, he said, are nervous and may do something. Safety is our #1 charge.

Selectman Clifford Perry – inquired as to the cost to hire two more people right now; the response was \$132,694.49. There was some discussion about the need to buy new vehicles. New hires are the most expensive and the officer is lucky to get \$40,000 of that.

Commissioner Gardner – the County is not just the Sheriff's Office, but Deeds, Probate, the RCC, the Jail and the DA. Which one would you rather we did not do? And...we live in these historical buildings. He brought the meeting to a close and thanked the participants. Law enforcement will meet and formulate a resource base now and needs two weeks. What does the County need to do – we want to hear from the towns; are we a county of action?

Adjournment – 6:15pm