

Future Of Westhampton Beach Police Department Uncertain As Consolidation Talks Swirl

Publication: The Southampton Press

By Kyle Campbell Sep 2, 2014 3:13 PM

UPDATED Sep 2, 2014 4:30 PM

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Two months after Police Chief Ray Dean's retirement, Westhampton Beach Village still has no timetable for replacing him, leaving the future of the small department very much up in the air.

Meanwhile, Southampton Town officials appear eager to discuss a possible consolidation of the town and village police forces.

While some Village Board members were under the impression that they might begin interviewing police chief candidates this week, Westhampton Beach Village Mayor Maria Moore—who is charge of all hiring in Village Hall—said she is still weighing her options. "As for the chief's position," Ms. Moore wrote in a text message, "the trustees

and I are still discussing our options."

Southampton Town Supervisor Anna Throne-Holst, meanwhile, said she hopes to capitalize on the fact that the village has a new mayor, and a vacancy at the head of its police department, to resurrect discussions of a possible consolidation, which would allow the Town Police to provide services in the village.

"With the chief retiring in Westhampton [Beach] and whatever, it seems like a very poignant moment to revisit this issue," Ms. Throne-Holst said, adding that the previous village mayor, Conrad Teller, was not open to the idea. Mr. Teller, who lost his reelection bid in June, is a former chief of both the Westhampton Beach and Southampton Town police departments.

Ms. Throne-Holst said during an interview last Thursday, August 28, that she's had "some very preliminary conversations" with Ms. Moore and Deputy Mayor Charlie Palmer regarding consolidation, although she has not had a chance to have an official face-to-face meeting with them on the issue.

But Ms. Moore insists that she's never spoken to Ms. Throne-Holst on the phone but has merely exchanged text messages and voicemails, none of which have mentioned either police department or consolidation talks. Ms. Moore said she "exchanged hellos" with

Ms. Throne-Holst at a meeting of local mayors and supervisors held in Riverhead last week, but insists that there was no time for them to talk shop.

Ms. Throne-Holst did not respond to multiple attempts seeking clarification this week.

While consolidation would be a boon to the Town Police, which would stand to gain revenue from any agreement to provide police services in the village, Ms. Throne-Holst said the main objective of such a merger would be to save all taxpayers in the municipality money, citing Governor Andrew Cuomo's push for such consolidation through the Department of State's Local Government Efficiency Program. The program offers grants and other benefits to assist with consolidation, and also rewards communities that commit to sharing such services.

"One thing that we're all very cognizant of is the governor has put out a tax rebate and abatement program for communities that not only stay under the tax cap but also seek to consolidate services," Ms. Throne-Holst said. "It's a very timely subject and one that, I think, is incumbent on all of us as legislators to explore to best serve our constituents and provide them as much tax relief as possible."

Westhampton Beach has set aside \$2.28 million for its police department for the 2014-15 fiscal year, accounting for nearly a quarter of its \$9.76 million total operating budget. The village has 11 full-time and six part-time officers, according to Westhampton Beach Police Lieutenant Trevor Gonce, who has been in charge since the former chief's departure. The department also employs five part-time traffic control officers, two full-time dispatchers and two crossing guards.

Meanwhile, the Town Police Department has an annual operating budget of \$19.7 million, with roughly \$17 million of that coming from tax revenue, and it also accounts for nearly a quarter of the town's \$81.1 million budget for 2014. The town force has 103 officers, though only 89 are employed full time.

Southampton Town Police Chief Robert Pearce said he's in favor of consolidating services whenever possible, so he feels it's worth discussing a merging or sharing services with Westhampton Beach.

Chief Pearce noted that he's also discussed the idea with Ms. Throne-Holst but he's waiting on the supervisor to talk with Ms. Moore before any statistical analysis is done to determine exactly how much his department stands to gain.

Ultimately, he added, it's up to officials in Westhampton Beach to decide whether or not to go forward.

"People like local control," he said. "Without a doubt, it's hard to give up, so the ball is going to be in Westhampton Beach's hand if they want to explore it."

Ms. Moore declined to take a stand on how she would feel about consolidation. "If we were to receive a proposal, we would review and discuss it," she wrote in a text message. "But it's not something we are looking into at this time."

While Village Board members Ralph Urban and Patricia DiBenedetto both noted last

week that the police department has been operating sufficiently as an independent agency, Trustee Hank Tucker was the most vocal opponent to the idea of consolidation. Mr. Tucker said having a separate village department helps keep property values high and is a valuable asset to the community that should not be given up.

"That's nothing I'm really interested in at this time," he said of consolidation. "If others are, that's up to them, but I feel that in our community we're an incorporated village, and one of the benefits our community gets is a police force. I like having a police force."

Mr. Palmer did not return multiple calls seeking comment this week.

In recent years, the town has worked to maintain police coverage in the incorporated villages of North Haven and Sagaponack, Ms. Throne-Holst said, adding that she has also approached Sag Harbor about consolidating its police department as well.

Ms. DiBenedetto said she hopes the village can hire more officers to stop that trend of reducing the staff through attrition, a policy that she said Mr. Teller had enforced during his tenure by refusing to fill openings when officers left or retired.

"Conrad, former mayor Teller, kept wanting a trimmed-down force, and it's time to start replenishing after years of having members retire or leaving and working with a skeleton staff," she said.

Ms. Moore said any new hires would be left up to the new chief—whomever that ends up being.

Lt. Gonce, who has been in charge of the department since Mr. Dean's departure, said he has not been informed of any consolidation discussions nor has he been updated on the search for a new chief.

When Mr. Dean left office, he presumed Lt. Gonce would be his heir apparent as chief. That has proven to not necessarily be the case, despite the praise Lt. Gonce has received from some trustees, including Mr. Urban, the board's former liaison to the police department.

"I think he's done an extremely good job because it was the summer season, which is our busiest, then he had to coordinate with secret service when Hilary Clinton was in town," Mr. Urban said. "And he's had a number of other events to coordinate, so I think he's done an excellent job."



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