

POLICING IN NORWICH: A PROGRESS REPORT

*Presented to the Norwich Selectboard by the Police Services Committee
February 11, 2009*

Following a six month period of data-gathering and citizen input during mid-2007, we, the Norwich Police Services Committee (“NPSC”) published a report recommending to the Selectboard a series of corrective actions intended to improve the relationship between the town police and the public. Those actions specifically included: (1) normalization of the relationship between the selectboard, town manager, and the police chief consistent with Vermont law and generally-accepted practices in other towns; (2) the implementation of a community policing model; and (3) improved transparency and accountability.

Having reviewed the corrective actions taken since the issuance of our report, we are pleased to announce that the report’s stated objectives have largely been accomplished.

I. HIERARCHY NORMALIZATION

In our report, we recommended that the Selectboard confine its role to defining police policy objectives, that the town manager ensure that those objectives are implemented, and that the police chief exercise independent judgment in the day-to-day administration of the Department’s law enforcement duties.

This goal has largely been accomplished. Our present town manager is not involved in day-to-day policing decisions. The Selectboard, whether intentionally or otherwise, has generally refrained (with some exceptions) from micromanaging the police department. We hope that these short-term trends persist.

II. IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNITY POLICING

In our report, we recommended that Norwich adopt a community policing model that places the actual needs of town residents above a myopic concern with enforcement of state statutes. We believe that Chief Robinson has effectively implemented community policing in Norwich.

In 2007, the Norwich Police Department (NPD) adopted a new mission statement stating that the Department henceforth shall be “community-oriented” and is “commit[ted] to working collaboratively with the community towards effective problem resolution.” Recent history suggests that this mission statement is being followed.

NPD has developed a number of programs intended to positively engage children – ranging from Bicycle Safety Day to providing glow sticks on Halloween. NPD

officers participate in safety drills at the Marion Cross School, “Job Shadow Day” at the Richmond School,” and perform crossing guard duty as resources permit.

Both formal and informal research has shown that speeding is a major law enforcement concern for town residents. NPD has struck an appropriate balance by maintaining a visible presence to deter would-be speeders, while avoiding the perception that it is issuing unfair “revenue tickets.” NPD has effectively used its limited resources to instill in would-be speeders a fear of apprehension, while making judicious use of warnings rather than tickets when appropriate.

Chief Robinson reports that each of his officers has attended a Community Policing course and that such training will continue to be made available as resources allow. We are pleased to hear this.

III. TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

In our report, we enumerated the following corrective actions that, in our collective opinion, needed to be undertaken to repair the relationship between the NPD and the public: (1) improved professionalism on the part of patrol officers; (2) the implementation of a uniform process for dealing with citizen complaints against the police; and (3) the implementation of uniform enforcement standards.

We note at the outset that citizen complaints against the police have declined substantially since our Committee began its work in early 2007, which is testament to improved police demeanor and professionalism. Specifically, complaints of “harassment” of teens have decreased.

There has been significant personnel turnover at NPD in recent years, and we commend Chief Robinson for selecting a current force consisting of experienced, polite, professional and capable officers. We recommend that NPD be given the support necessary to retain these officers.

Citizens with grievances are now free to meet directly with Chief Robinson, who regularly makes his time available for that purpose. NPD also holds monthly forums on pre-announced topics that have the potential to become question-and-answer sessions if the need arises. At this time, we do not feel that the volume of citizen complaints would justify a more cumbersome grievance process, e.g., hearings by an ombudsperson.

NPD has made significant progress in earning a reputation for fair but firm enforcement. The volume of traffic stops has held steady, but the proportion of warnings versus traffic tickets issued has increased. The ratio of warnings to tickets now stands at 4:1 over the past year. While it is nearly impossible to ascertain in the short-term whether this ratio is optimal, we feel it has earned NPD a measure of trust and goodwill from town residents that was historically less apparent.

IV. CONCLUSION

We commend Chief Robinson for implementing our recommendations – in many cases proactively before our report was completed. The Selectboard, by its nature as a legislative body, will change in composition from year-to-year; however we hope that

it will continue to offer firm policy guidance, but resist the urge to play armchair quarterback. And, to all parties – Police Chief, Selectboard, and Town Manager – we offer the following counsel: as the years pass and memories fade, be mindful of the lessons learned from this experience. Dust off the NPSC report. Give it another read. And be committed to avoiding past mistakes. History would suggest that the town will need another “police committee” and another “police report” in five or ten years time. But, it doesn’t have to be that way. You get to break the cycle.