

2004 Police Department Annual Report

The year 2004 continues to force the Police Department to improvise continually to maintain priority services to the residents and the businesses of North Hampton. An additional challenge to the Department in 2004 was to keep up with the increasing calls caused by the increased number of people being drawn into North Hampton by a quickly growing base of large and small businesses.

Throughout 2004 the seriousness of the crimes committed continued to escalate requiring more time for initial investigation and follow-up investigation by the officers involved. At the same time the Department continued to receive countless calls from residents pleading with us to give more patrol to their streets to curb the serious problem of speeding vehicles and reckless drivers. These types of demands from residents and businesses in town have in itself resulted in considerable increases in motor vehicle stops (+25%), arrests (+18%), incident reports that are criminal in nature (+10%), and even overall calls for service (+6%). These increases in many situations do not reflect the hundreds of hours that are spent by officers in follow-up and investigation time, in order to clear cases that are not discovered in progress.

The current number of law enforcement employees for the Police Department is at eleven (one civilian, ten officers). This staffing level was approved at Town Meeting in March of 1988 and the staff has remained at that level for nearly 17 years. Over that 17 years I have witnessed many factors place many more demands on the Police Department, demands that have now become nearly impossible to meet without increasing staffing. The population of North Hampton has been somewhat controlled over the last seven years, but the incredible influx of large and small retail business has quickly caused timely services to be taken away from the residents of town. As of December 2003, nearly 600,000 more vehicles travel Lafayette Road on a yearly basis than in 2001. With these types of numbers surfacing in 2003 traffic counts, there is not much question in my mind that 2004 figures will be even higher once they are known. Unlike some surrounding towns that have a minimal business base, many of the drivers of those half-million vehicles now stop in North Hampton and do business. Unfortunately many of these people now stop and also commit assaults, shoplift, commit identity theft, commit forgery, write bad checks, commit sexual assaults, commit burglaries, commit bank robbery, and of course steal cars and car parts from our dealerships. With new procedures, more serious crime, and of course a much higher number of crimes it has been nearly impossible to consistently respond in a timely manner to the demands of the businesses, the residents, and to continue the school programs that are so important to the children of North Hampton.

Under the old philosophy of Law Enforcement with this Department, Patrol Officers had two very specific responsibilities. The first was aggressive enforcement of Motor Vehicle Laws. The second was to do constant patrol in order to maintain a level of visibility that would prevent criminal activity. We now know from several studies (Kansas City, Chicago, Duluth, and others) that this approach does not prevent crimes from taking place. We also know from studies and experience that the way to prevent further crime is to aggressively investigate, solve, and arrest the perpetrators who commit these crimes so they are not left on the street to commit further crimes. Until 1991, this Department worked under the old philosophy that generated very high statistics of motor vehicle warnings and citations. It also resulted in arrests being higher every year, mainly from motor vehicle arrests than from the investigation of crimes. It is obvious in looking at statistics prior to 1998 that this approach did not lower the rate of crime, but allowed it to soar higher. One example of this was the extensive number of residential and business burglaries, which were at an all time high of 42 in 1987 and 1988. Other examples were the crimes in the Public Peace category, where harassment, phone harassment, disorderly conduct, and criminal mischief were allowed to soar higher due to a lack of investigation by the Department. The increasing criminal activity in North Hampton during this period was caused by an "old school" mentality that taking a quick initial report and then returning to patrol to remain visible would prevent further crimes from being committed. In reality this prevented the initial responding officer from finding critical evidence at the crime scene that could have assisted in solving these crimes and arresting those responsible.

For these reasons and other reasons to follow within this town report, and as a professional who has served the town for over 21 years, I found it absolutely necessary to make a recommendation to the Board of Selectmen and the Budget Committee to add two additional police officers to a staff that has been constant since 1988. If these two police officers are approved it would increase the number of officers per 1000 in population from 2.3 officers to 2.8 officers. Even with the two additional officers, North Hampton would be well under the Northeast average for Law Enforcement Employees which is currently at 3.2 law enforcement employees per 1000 in population. It would also place us under the Seacoast New Hampshire average of officers per 1000 in population, which currently mirrors the 3.2 average for all of the agencies in the Northeast. This increased level of staffing would ease my mind as to our ability to respond to the residents' emergencies in a timely fashion, and it would also prevent the continuation of one police officer responding to very dangerous situations at certain times of the night without another officer to assist him.

The members of the agency and I all feel that it is extremely important that the committees and residents of North Hampton decide the police budget for fiscal year 2005-2006 based on their own understanding of the demands being placed on the Department. Of course it also needs to be based on their own expectations of services they require from the Police Department. With the information that has been presented to the selectmen, the budget committee, in public hearings, and in this town report, it is our hope that all of those involved will have enough information to make an informed decision at the polls about their desired levels of police protection.