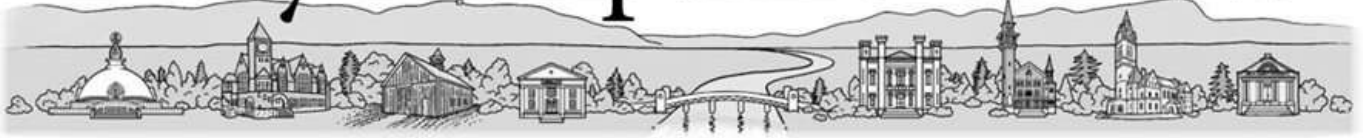


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## Small town police departments prep for financial burden of reform bill



Leverett Police Chief Scott Minckler outside the Wendell Police Station. The Leverett department provides policing services in Wendell through an inter-municipal agreement. Staff File Photo/Paul Franz > [Buy this Image](#)

By [CHRIS LARABEE](#) and [BERA DUNAU](#) ([/byline?byline=By CHRIS LARABEE and BERA DUNAU](/byline?byline=By%20CHRIS%20LARABEE%20and%20BERA%20DUNAU))

Staff Writers

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While all are in favor of the reforms, they say the new training requirements for part-time officers — which make the training equivalent to that experienced by full-time officers — place a heavy financial burden on departments in the short term and may lead to staff shortages in the long term.

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Leverett Police Chief Scott Minckler said training all officers to the same standard is an important move from the state, but the financial aspect of paying for the training will strain small-town departments' budgets. Leverett's department also covers the neighboring town of Wendell.

"I think it's a great thing — it's something that I'm in support of — getting all officers trained to the same level," Minckler said. "The financial side is more of a concern for small towns because that's right now; losing staff is two or three years down the road."

The new bill, S.2963, requires part-time officers to take part in "Bridge Academy" training, which is approximately 200 additional hours of training broken down into 80 hours of online training, 40 hours of in-person firearms training, 40 hours of in-person defensive tactics training and 40 hours of in-person emergency vehicle operator course, according to the Bridge Academy's website.

Minckler said training shouldn't affect patrols because only three of his officers will be partaking in the training to start with, but the financial burden of paying for the academy will be tough to get past.

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“It’s not going to dip into our patrol hours, it’s going to dip into our budget to pay them to go,” Minckler said. “I averaged somewhere between \$6,000 and \$8,000 per officer for Bridge Academy ... from ammunition, paying them to go and their time.”

In the worst-case scenario, the Leverett Police Department will be on the hook for \$24,000 for which it did not budget.

“If you go on the high end, we’re looking at \$24,000. I don’t have that,” Minckler said. “For a small town like us, the financial side is going to be harder than losing staff.”

## Greener pastures

Further down the line, part-time officers, who trained to the same level of their full-time counterparts, may seek jobs in other towns that can pay them more for their service. Minckler doesn’t anticipate that happening in Leverett as many of his part-time officers already have full-time employment elsewhere, but he says he could see it being a challenge in other towns.

“Pay could be a thing, it could be something that comes up in the next contract negotiations,” he added. “It’s still about two years away, but I could see some financial issues coming.”



Although some departments may be facing financial struggles, state Sen. Jo Comerford, D-Northampton, has earmarked \$100,000 in funding to help departments in Franklin County — \$75,000 to pay for Bridge Academy training and \$25,000 for a study on policing in small towns.

“The Legislature passed a bill that will require towns to train police officers,” Comerford said, “and I believe that we have a responsibility to help towns meet that provision in the law.”

She added that each area in the state has different challenges when it comes to implementing the bill’s provisions, but the Bridge Academy was the biggest hurdle for departments in this part of the state.

“People in Fall River are having a different response to this,” Comerford said. “Out here, the Bridge Academies were a critical piece and I think it was my job to respond to the passage of the bill by hearing from communities about how they were grappling with implementation and doing everything I could to be of service.”

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Comerford also advocated for and secured an additional \$1 million in the state budget for the Municipal Police Training Committee, which she hopes will find its way into the small-town departments that are affected by the bill.

“I am actively advocating to start developing the formula for how this gets disbursed for small-town policing for Bridge Academies,” Comerford said. “We just need that money to flow to our local communities so there will be some assurance that some funds will be there to defray the costs.”



Echoing Minckler, Whately Police Chief James Sevine voiced his concerns at a recent Select Board meeting about his officers possibly seeking jobs elsewhere.

“Once these (part-time) officers are certified, they are certified as a police officer; there’s no difference,” Sevine said at the Oct. 13 meeting. “They could then take a job somewhere else. ... There’s a potential we could lose some of our officers within the next three to five years.”

He said the department only has one officer in the first round of training, but it’ll have six officers going through the Bridge Academy in total.

In Cummington, Police Chief Michael Perkins said that Town Meeting allocated the necessary funds earlier this year for him and another officer to attend the Bridge Academy. However, because officers are set to attend in alphabetical batches, Perkins won’t have to attend until next fiscal year and the other officer won’t have to go until the fiscal year after.

“I was trying to be proactive,” said Perkins, of the successful request.

Perkins said he was hoping to attend the training early, but it doesn’t look like that will be possible. He said plans to speak to the Select Board to see if they can get state funding to help with the training costs.

Additionally, Perkins said he thinks the Legislature will need to continue to help out small communities with the effects of the reform, and that he looks forward to working with Rep. Natalie Blais, D-Sunderland, and Northampton Rep. Lindsay Sabadosa on this issue.

“The Legislature’s going to have to help out these rural communities in some way shape or

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He also said that of the two officers who have to go to the Bridge Academy this year, one is considering not going because he is self-employed and it would take too much time away from his business.

The other officer is employed by more than one agency, and Garriepy said that they're trying to figure out which agencies will pay for his training.

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Garriepy noted additionally that support from the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security on the implementation of the reform has been encouraging.



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