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Small town police depts. prep for financial burden of reform bill



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Peter Buck, the newly appointed Petersham police chief, right, shakes hands with retiring Police Chief Dana Cooley, who had asked that \$22,216 be added to the department's budget to cover training, which Annual Town Meeting voters approved. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO



By [CHRIS LARABEE \(/byline?byline=By_CHRIS_LARABEE\)](#)

Staff Writer

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The state's police reform bill that was signed into law last year and went into effect in July could have long-lasting consequences on the finances and staffing of small-town police departments, according to local chiefs.

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.

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 as only three of his officers will be partaking in the training to start, but the financial burden of paying for the academy will be tough to get past.

"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 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."

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 pay for Bridge Academy training.

“The Legislature passed a bill that will require towns to train police officers,” Comerford said in a phone interview. “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 dispersed 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 Sevigne voiced his concerns at a recent Selectboard 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,” Sevigne 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.

Other departments in the region, however, are in a good place with both staffing and finances. Petersham’s newly appointed Police Chief Peter Buck said the department was able to plan ahead of time for Bridge Academy training. Retiring Chief Dana Cooley had asked that \$22,216 be added to the department’s budget at Petersham’s Annual Town Meeting in June.

“Chief Cooley and the Selectboard had the foresight to go to the town floor and ask for a specialized budget in order to cover payroll hours, gear — if there was additional gear required,” Buck explained. “They did a great job getting ahead of that.”

Of the nine part-time Petersham officers, four are participating in the current cycle of the Bridge Academy. Two officers are currently on military orders and will be certified when they return to duty.

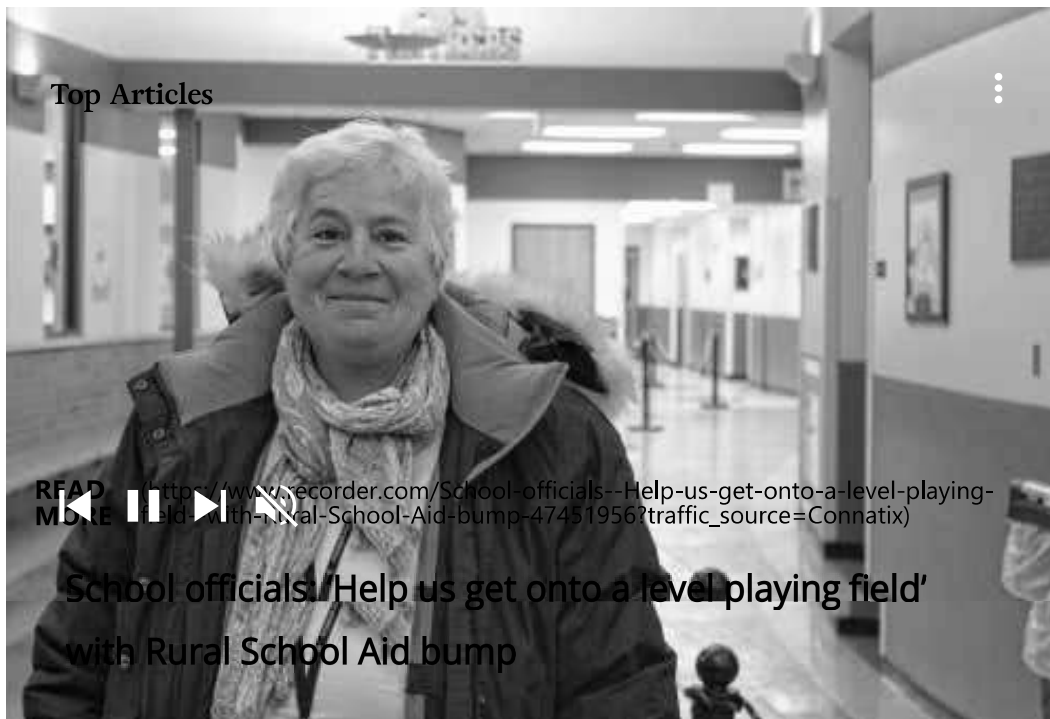
Buck said “it’s possible” that his department may lose some officers in the coming years, but much like Leverett, many staff members have other full-time commitments in the town and have no desire to become full-time officers.

“I don’t see many officers leaving because a majority of our officers have other full-time employment,” Buck said. “We strive to hire to retire, which means we hire somebody and they spend their entire career here.”

While other departments may struggle, Buck said Petersham is in a good place right now.

“I really think we’re going to do fine,” Buck said. “I think we’re very fortunate with the planning of Chief Cooley and the Selectboard.”

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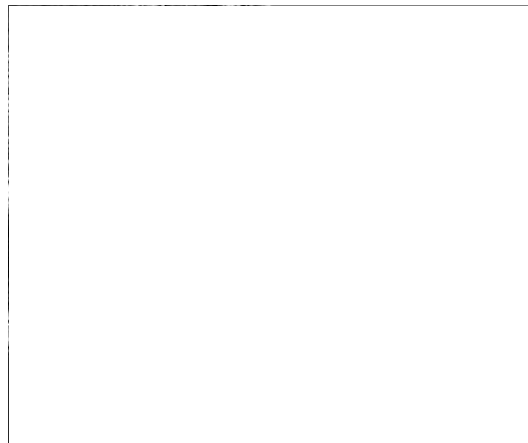
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