Canterbury criticizes, looks to improve police department

Canterbury Country Store owner Joe Halla brings a petition with 106 signatures calling for the disbandment of the town police department to the selectmen’s meeting Monday.

(ELODIE REED / Monitor staff)
By ELODIE REED
Monitor staff
Tuesday, December 8, 2015
(Published in print: Tuesday, December 8, 2015)

Canterbury's problems seem to have begun with one police chief and may only end with another one.

That was the main message of a jam-packed two-hour discussion during Monday night's selectmen's meeting. About 70 people squeezed into the Canterbury Meeting House to complain about police incompetency and unprofessionalism and to demand that selectmen do something to fix it.

The conversation began months ago, after Canterbury police Chief John Laroche was arrested in August following accusations that he forced a young female cadet to perform sexual acts on him more than a decade ago while he served with the Boscawen Police Department. He was indicted in October by a grand jury on four charges of felonious aggravated sexual assault charges.

Currently, at his request, Laroche is on unpaid leave.

Canterbury Store owner Joe Halla said that during this period and even before, he began noticing a pattern in what customers were telling him regarding the police. “Any number of people have come in the store with concerns and problems in the police department,” he said. “The subject then came up . . . to put a petition together. Somebody did that and put it on the counter – there it sat, and people signed it.”

A total of 106 signatures filled the petition's six pages. Above them was this request: “The Citizens of Canterbury who have signed below request that the Board of Selectmen dissolve the Canterbury Police Department as it is unnecessary and police protection can be provided by the State Police and/or the Merrimack County Sheriff Department.”

On Monday, Halla put a sign on his door reading “Store will be closed at 6:15 tonight” and showed up to the selectmen’s meeting for his scheduled time on the agenda that night. Sitting before the board with rows of people behind him, Halla asked whether the petition’s suggestion was possible – to which selectmen Chairman Bob Steenson said it was not.

“It's probably not within the authority of the selectmen to dissolve the police department – that would be a town meeting thing,” said Steenson. He added that the department did have standard operating procedures that it was supposed to follow, and that, from his view, “a police department is very necessary in this day and age.”
Regardless, Halla said, he wanted to explain what he understood was the problem. He shared anecdotes told to him by customers: police suggesting the victim of a theft ask the suspected thief to meet with an officer; police telling a woman she had been “watching too much CSI” when she asked whether fingerprints could be taken from a rock that was thrown through her windshield; police asking a person whether she really wanted them to look for her stolen car, which was an “older model.”

“Some of this stuff embarrasses me,” Halla said.

Over the next two hours, dozens of audience members added in their bad experiences with the four officers that comprise Canterbury's Police Department.

One of them, Doug Carson, submitted a letter to selectmen. He described its contents last night.

“Basically about a year and a half ago, I was coming to the town fair. There was a black pickup in front of me,” Carson said. Leaning into the window was a man wearing shorts, tennis shoes and a yellow safety vest, he said, and after a few moments of waiting behind the truck, Carson said he pulled up and beeped once.

“This person looked over his shoulder and said, 'Just a g--damn minute,'” said Carson. “He told me to get back into my effing car or he would arrest me or Tase me. This person actually had his hand on his gun and his Taser.”

Another resident, 87-year-old Willie Nelson, described being held up for two hours waiting for New Hampshire State Police after accidentally taking off the side mirror of a Canterbury cruiser. “They wanted to put me in handcuffs,” he said.

Shortly after, Officer Randy DiFruscio stood up to point out that it's the law to call state police anytime someone damages a cruiser.

DiFruscio was the only Canterbury officer who spoke during the meeting. His son Kyle sat quietly behind him, and Sgt. Ernie Beaulieu Jr., who has taken a leadership role in Laroche's absence, stood silent in the dark corridor attached to the room.

While many audience members pointed to specific instances of slow response time, rude conduct or laziness by specific officers, others said there was a broader problem to be handled. The general consensus was that the police department should remain in Canterbury but be fundamentally changed.

Resident Keith Brown said: “It takes a lot in any town to stand up and complain about your police department. G--damn, it's our money – we need our police and we need to trust them. We just want management.”

Selectmen received their fair share of criticism at Monday's meeting for not taking complaints about the police seriously and for not holding officers accountable.
Brown directly addressed the board and said, “This is anger. I support the police – you guys need to fix it. Get busy.”

Others in the audience pushed for specific ways selectmen will move the issue forward. Nancy Fifield asked that police incident reports be posted on the town website, and Oliver Fifield suggested an advisory board made up of town residents and an outside consultant be formed to review the Canterbury Police Department. More people felt the hiring process for a police chief needed to be improved.

Selectmen agreed with those suggestions as places to start. Planning board member Tyson Miller said the board was “crippled” in any action it took, however, as long as Laroche was still chief of the department.

Resident Diana Scott asked, “Can’t we just ask him to resign?”

Steenson responded, “We tried that.”

Retired Concord police officer Jim Berry repeated, however, that the problem for the Canterbury Police Department seems to start at the top – with the chief – and will most likely end there.

“It sounds like nothing but a lack of supervision,” Berry said, referring to the instances of unprofessionalism or sloppiness cited Monday night.

Steenson agreed, and said the selectmen were already making another attempt to remove Laroche and start fresh.

“We’re making a renewed effort to see if we can move on and resolve the issue,” said Steenson. “John Laroche needs to do the right thing and resign for this community.”

(Elodie Reed can be reached at 369-3306, ereed@cmonitor.com or on Twitter @elodie_reed.)
Contribute:

- Suggest a correction
- Send a photo
- Suggest a link
- Send a news tip
- Letter to the Editor

Comments

0 Comments
Sort by: Oldest

Add a comment...

Popular

Most read stories in the past 48 hours.

1. Boys' basketball preview: Concord looking to rebound from down year in competitive D-I

2. Neighbors anxious about plan to fix flooding at Kimball Jenkins Estate

3. Report: N.H. homelessness not falling; tight rental market complicates efforts

4. Ex-state psychologist files complaint over judge's remarks, which he says led to firing

5. HHS proposes to convert half of juvenile detention center for psychiatric treatment
6. After successful lawsuit, Linda Horan becomes first N.H. resident to legally obtain medical marijuana

7. High school swimming: Concord boys come in second behind Dover

8. High schools: Belmont boys clamp down to beat Mascoma, 58-50

9. PolitiFact: Ted Cruz misfires on definition of ‘carpet bombing’ in GOP debate

10. Pound-for-pound high school rankings
(http://www.concordmonitor.com/sports/2009665-95/pound-for-pound-high-school-rankings) (878 reads)