Salem Police Department hires outside PR firm

JJ Keeping public informed:

Civilian Administrator Brian Pattullo said need for communication is important due to pending investigations involving police.

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SALEM — The Salem Police Department has hired the Georgetown, Mass.-based John Guilfoil Public Relations firm to assist the department with public relations, as well as the creation of an online news blog.

Owner John Guilfoil said the goal of the deal, which began this month, is to supplement and augment the department’s communication with the public, in the hopes of making it more effective and efficient.

“We first and foremost do not come in as a gatekeeper and a barrier,” Guilfoil said. “We’re not the (public information officer).”

Civilian Administrator Brian Pattullo said the agreement with Guilfoil was reached after he and Capt. Joel Dolan met with him on April 18. It will cost less than $10,000 this year, and the firm will be contracted on an annual basis. The money will come from asset forfeiture, he said, so it will not cost taxpayers.

Pattullo said contracting the firm was part of an effort to keep the public informed, and to ease the burden on officers.

“We felt it was important enough to have that in place and have good information flowing out of the department that’s accurate, that’s timely,” Pattullo said.

be assigned on an ad hoc basis. The contract will also come with some training, though Salem hasn’t scheduled any training sessions yet.

One of the goals of the arrangement is to showcase the people who work in the department and more of the positive things the department is doing, Pattullo said.

A news release sent through JGPR Friday afternoon highlighted how the Salem Police Department partnered with the Methuen Police Department for a four-hour traffic enforcement program called Connect to Disconnect on April 11. The national program organizes an effort to issue warnings to drivers using cell phones while operating their vehicles.

Pattullo said the department is also making an increased effort to rebuild partnerships with neighboring police departments.

Guilfoil said he has known Dolan since he started the company in 2013, and has stayed in touch over the years. Dolan has been the officer in charge of the department, under Pattullo’s oversight, since Deputy Chief Robert Morin was placed on administrative leave in January pending a criminal investigation by the Attorney General’s office.

Morin has notified the town he intends to retire on June 1.

Former Chief Paul Donovan, Capt. Michael Wagner and Sgt. Michael Verrocchi are also under criminal investigation. Grand jury proceedings have begun at Rockingham County Superior Court in connection to the investigations.

The department has been the subject of less favorable headlines since the release of a critical audit report last November, which outlined a mismanaged internal investigations program, payroll issues and a culture of insubordination to town authority.
He said the arrangement is especially important as it nears some challenging news updates expected this year.

“We have a lot of iron in the fire with investigations in the future, with three ranking people here,” Pattullo said, referring to criminal probes the state Attorney General’s office is conducting.

Guilfoil said base recurring costs are related to the firm’s public relations and content writing. In addition to that, there will be a one-time cost for the creation of the news blog, which is under construction and due to launch in early to mid-May.

He plans to work closely with the department on creating the website, and staff writers will

Guilfoil said it has long been a priority for the firm to work with Salem and other Rockingham County communities.

“We’re very happy to have Salem as a client,” Guilfoil said. “Salem is a really interesting and thriving and bustling community.”

The company is currently contracted with the Rochester and Bedford police departments. In the past, it has also partnered with police in Exeter, Portsmouth and Moultonborough.