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Social worker post will extend reach of Barre police

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BARRE — The next hire to Barre's police force won't wear a badge or a uniform and won't carry a gun. The soon-to-be-filled, state-funded position will be part of the local law enforcement community, but the person's role will be more akin to a multi-tasking social worker.

And Chief Timothy Bombardier couldn't be happier.

It's not that Bombardier doesn't believe Barre would benefit from an extra patrol officer or two. He does. Or that the man who took the helm of the Granite City's police department five years ago didn't have higher hopes for a summer-long study that focused on identifying ways to help people released from prison ease back into the community. He — and others — did.

Even before the Barre Re-entry Task Force began its meetings this year, Bombardier was already looking for ways to fund a unique position. He wanted a new post that would allow his officers to focus on law enforcement issues rather than responding to people in crisis.

Bombardier has long believed in the need for a "community outreach interventionist." Approval to fill such a position was the sole recommendation from a task force that had hoped to propose a more robust plan for addressing recidivism in Barre.

Then Tropical Storm Irene stuck. Its massive devastation forced the panel, led by Rep. Paul Poirier, I-Barre, to acknowledge that the state's ability to provide seed money for the local initiative had been radically reduced.

Thanks to Irene, plans to launch a community resource center were instantly out of reach. But the firm commitment for \$100,000 — which the committee recommended be spent on an outreach interventionist — was not.

Bombardier is convinced the new position will make a major difference. He thinks it represents a down payment on a more comprehensive approach to problems that in many cases can be traced to people under the supervision of the state Department of Corrections.

"It's a good first step," he told city councilors this week.

"It isn't anything out of our pocket and it is a great opportunity to try to do something different within the community and help people who are already here," he added.

Poirier, who serves on the council, agreed, stressing that the proposal outlined by Bombardier reflected the task force's unanimous recommendation.

"It's a good opportunity for us to address some of our downtown issues," he said.

Councilors agreed to approve the recommendation and accept what was characterized as a state grant. However, first they were assured by Bombardier that there weren't any strings attached to that decision.

Councilor Anita Chadderton worried that the city couldn't commit to funding the position next year.

Bombardier said that won't be necessary.

"If this position is successful, we believe it will sustain itself and the (state) funding will continue to come," he said. "If it's not successful, the position will go away as will the funding."

Bombardier said he is confident that the position he hopes to fill soon will quickly prove its worth to the community.

"If things go even 80 percent as planned ... this is going to be a successful position. It's going to be self-sustaining and we're going to be able to go and grow from this point forward," he said.

Whoever is hired will report to Bombardier and be tasked with, among other things, coordinating intervention services for people in crisis and those involved with the state Department of Corrections. The post also will address issues ranging from employment to housing, and from substance abuse to mental health.

The salaried position has been pitched as a resource for both local law enforcement and the community at large.

According to the job description, the person hired must be willing to work a flexible schedule, respond to emergency situations and serve as a liaison between the police department and various social service agencies. The interventionist also will lead a four-week class for former offenders who are re-entering the community, and will provide ongoing in-service training for police personnel on mental health issues.

With benefits, the position, which will pay \$42,000 to \$48,000 a year, is expected to cost up to \$70,000. The balance of the grant will be spent on other expenses associated with creating the new post.

Bombardier said he hopes to have the person on board before year's end.

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