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LD 461

“An Act to Fund Rural Patrol Services in Washington County”

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus and distinguished members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee, I am David Burns from Washington County. I am the Chair of the Washington County Commissioners, former State Senator, Representative and Maine State Trooper.

It is a pleasure to appear before you today as I have had the privilege of serving several terms on this Committee along with some great legislators, which included Representative Lajoie. Thank you for your attention to this very important bill for we of Washington County.

If I could give you a little bit of history of public safety in Maine and Washington County, I think it would be helpful in your deliberations. I joined the State Police in December 1970. I recall that the State Police force was little over 300 sworn officers then. A little over 200 were in uniform and the rest were in other units such as the Criminal Division, Crime lab, etc. December of 1971, we added another 22 troopers to the department. That compliment has increased slightly over these years and I believe it reached its highest number in 1990 at 373. Since then, there has been a decline down to 335 in 2022. Fortunately, the legislature added 16 positions in 2023, which put the Bureau back up to 351 sworn positions. I believe Major Lucus Hare will provide a more complete background for you to consider.

I'll try to put into perspective our situation in Washington County now. In February of 1973, I was transferred from Aroostook County to the Calais area in Washington County. At that time, we had troopers in Milbridge, Cherryfield, Machias, Dennysville, Calais and Topsfield as well as a sergeant to supervise the Washington County troopers. Our work week was six days on, two days off and a four-day weekend off every five weeks. A day meant twenty-four hours back then. Washington County also had both full-time and part-time Sheriff's deputies as well as Marine Patrol and the Maine Warden Services. Many of our local Police Departments were well manned. We all worked co-operatively to provide public safety for Washington County citizens. In the 1980's, Troop J was formed (located in East Machias) to provide State Police services for both Hancock and Washington Counties. That troop consisted of 15-18 troopers, three sergeants and the Troop Lieutenant, to provide twenty-four/seven law enforcement coverage to the two Counties. When I was a patrol sergeant in Troop J in the early nineties, there were seven troopers assigned to my section to cover Washington and Hancock Counties. There were two other “sections” of troopers with similar

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numbers and responsibilities. During that era, law enforcement depended upon each other for support and information to benefit the public's safety. An example of this was when Commissioner Crowley was a patrol deputy and I was a trooper. We worked on many issues together, including when he became the Sheriff of Washington County. So, we have the same perspective of the need for rural law enforcement.

Over the years since my retirement, there have been many changes in the structure of law enforcement in Washington County. In 2009, during my first session in the Legislature, the State Police and the Washington County Sheriff's Office had "call sharing" agreements to provide rural law enforcement for Washington County. At that time, the State Police would cover two of the three sections. As State Police resources diminished, the Sheriff's Office had to increase the number of law enforcement positions and try to meet the needs of Washington County, as well as assisting municipal police departments experiencing a shortage of law enforcement resources.

Presently, the Sheriff's Office is not able to provide regular rural "traffic" patrol of Washington County because of the number of calls for service they receive. The Sheriff's Department is providing most of the rural law enforcement to Washington County with twelve deputies and three supervisors. They have recently had to notify several towns that they can only respond to emergencies and the non-emergency calls for service must wait until a regular shift deputy can respond. Overtime responses for deputies cost over \$100,000 extra last year. Deputies rarely have time to provide traffic enforcement, due to the number of other calls for service. An example of that would be the diminished number of drunk driver arrests. Whereas, when the State Police patrol was still available in Washington County, one section of patrol resulted in 15 OUI arrests in 2020 to 11 in 2023. This lack of law enforcement's ability to provide adequate highway public safety through regular patrol is extremely concerning and detrimental to Washington County citizens and the thousands who visit our County annually. The passage and funding of four troopers living in and being assigned to patrol in Washington County would help to remedy this critical situation, while allowing more time for fully investigating criminal and illicit drug related problems.

Washington County is facing serious budget problems currently, having to substantially increase the tax burdens on our towns and unorganized territories. Obviously, one of our largest portions of our budget is the Sheriff's Department, along with our County Jail and the Regional Communications Center for public safety.

In order to address the law enforcement issue, our entire county's delegation, lead by Senator Moore, County Commissioners, Sheriff's Department and the State Police have collaborated together and put forth this bill, LD 461. The cooperation between the Sheriff's Office and the State Police to bring back State Police support to Washington County has been what brings us here today. These two departments are in agreement to revert back to the "call sharing" agreement from 2023, which will provide full, 24-hour coverage to one-third of Washington County provided by the Maine State Police.

As I am sure you are aware, the State Police provide many other services to the entire state such as major crime investigation, tactical teams response, crime laboratory, and the Computer Crime Task Force, to mention only a few. However, Washington County, like other rural counties in Maine, is in dire need of more State Police patrol support. We, the Commissioners of Washington County also support those other Counties in their rural patrol

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needs, which are before you today in LD 477. Washington County, however, is in dire need of that support immediately and with the assurance that we will not face this issue in the future.

We as Washington County Commissioners would ask you to unanimously support this bill, LD 461 and help us to protect our citizens' public safety.

Thank you for your consideration.

Commissioner David C. Burns, Chair
Commissioner John B. Crowley Sr.
Commissioner William Howard