



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Senator Beebe Center, Representative Hasenfus, Distinguished Members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee:

My name is Will Tuell. I represent nearly two dozen communities in central Washington County with populations of 1500 or less, and I am here today to testify in strong support of LD 461, "An Act to Fund Rural Patrol Services in Washington County."

Last December our county's legislative delegation met with representatives of Maine State Police and our county's sheriff department to discuss the issues facing law enforcement in Washington County. For nearly two hours we listened, discussed, and formulated strategies for increasing rural patrol in our geographically isolated region of the state that just so happens to be the size of Rhode Island and Connecticut combined.

This bill to add four patrol officers to Maine State Police was the end result of that meeting, one which has been endorsed by our sheriff, county commissioners, and, unofficially, by Maine State Police themselves, although they will be testifying "Neither for Nor Against" here today.

Rural patrol has become a central issue in our county. Over the years, as Sen. Moore has testified, the increasing demands on the State Police and a realignment geared toward specialization have resulted in, for lack of a better term, a "pull out" of badly needed troopers across rural Maine as a whole and Washington County in particular leaving our sheriff's department and a handful of municipal police departments to fill the void.

Credit to our sheriff, Barry Curtis, for pushing the county to add patrol deputies at a time when our county budget is up almost 22 percent over the previous year, and could have gone up as much as 33 percent. Credit also to those communities in our region who have kept their police departments and provided coverage to the best of their ability despite also facing increased workloads and even tighter budgets.

Even so, there are critical gaps in law enforcement around the county. Most of our local PDs either do not have 24-hour coverage, leaving the sheriff's department to cover what they can when they can, or have no police at all, meaning that the sheriff and his deputies are racing from one crisis to another from one end of the county to the other as manpower allows.

We know that the State Police can and will answer the call as they are able, but having four dedicated full-time officers doing patrol in Washington County would go a long way to responding quickly to calls across the region. The State Police have told our delegation that they would work with Sheriff Curtis and his deputies, as well as the local departments, to fill in those gaps, to increase service, and bring the same level of public safety to our rural county that others have come to expect and lean upon.

While it easy to focus on numbers, cases, manpower and budgets, before I close, I'd like to share a story with you all that illustrates just how badly we are in need of these four troopers.

Last summer while knocking doors in a more rural neighborhood of one of my most rural towns, I encountered something I've never seen in ten years of knocking on doors. House after house would not answer the door when I knocked. Ordinarily, I would chalk this up to people not wanting to talk to a stranger or a politician, but this was different.

When I finally did find someone home who would answer and had a chance to talk for a few minutes, the woman at the door explained that she and many of her neighbors were nervous about people coming to their door because things were missing from the neighborhood, chainsaws, firewood, an ATV had disappeared, rumors of drug activity, and such. That was just one house, but by day's end I had heard similar stories five, six, maybe eight times. People – many of them elderly – were scared to leave their homes, knew that there wasn't any law enforcement within 20-30 minutes on a good day, and had pretty much resigned to the fact that they had to watch out for their own property.

I realize law enforcement can't be everywhere at once, and if there's a traffic accident in Lubec and a burglary in Princeton, and a domestic dispute in Pembroke, choices have to be made.

Adding these four patrol officers would give our county and local law enforcement agencies a boost in manpower, but it would also say to the people of Charlotte, Alexander, Big Lake Township, Edmunds, and every small community in my district that there is law enforcement in their town, on call, ready to respond whether that's to a traffic accident, a drug bust, a domestic violence incident, or one of the 300 suspected "illegal grow" operations our county sheriff's warned us about at breakfast last month. If we are going to fight crime in Maine, we need to have a visible, active, responsive police presence, and nowhere is that more true than in Washington County.

Please, on behalf of our small rural communities in dire straits, pass LD 461 and any other legislation that boosts the State Police force, a force that has not been meaningfully invested in since the mid 70s.