

To the Town of Middlebury from Officer Mason, on behalf of the MPD

As you consider our proposals in the ongoing contract negotiations between the Town and the MPD, I wanted to share my perspective with you.

There are, of course, many sound arguments for a town investing in its PD. Ensuring public safety is fundamental to the flourishing of a town, but these are broad issues that apply generally to municipalities. What distinguishes Middlebury is the extent to which this is woven into our identity. Vermont's crime rate is exceptionally low, and the crime rate in Middlebury is modest even by Vermont standards. This is part of what draws people here – along with our exceptional schools and other services. We appeal to people because of our reputation for strong community. Middlebury is especially attractive because it offers a small-town sense of connection along with a relatively cosmopolitan atmosphere. It is this combination that draws gifted and passionate people to our town and, ultimately, fuels our economy – it is the vital core of economic development in Middlebury.

Protecting the sense of security upon which this is founded is the mission of the MPD, but, beyond that, we strive to actively contribute to our town's thriving by engaging in community policing, supporting this extraordinary balance of small-town charm and sophisticated culture. This requires a very special kind of officer, with very particular skills.

To this end, the MPD is exceptionally discriminating in who it hires. This is of enormous benefit to the department and the town, evidenced in the low crime rate, but also in the tremendous level of public trust we enjoy and the low level of complaint and scandal we have suffered through a period of almost unprecedented suspicion and hostility toward police. This particularity comes with a price, however, and we have been operating almost continually understaffed for as long as most officers can remember. This lack of staffing generates stress on the department, but also has significant financial consequences.

In addition, Middlebury, as the seat of the County, offers services to marginalized members of the larger Addison community – people struggling with mental health problems, addiction and extreme poverty. Much of what we do involves this population, and often the situations call for extreme delicacy – for patience, compassion and ingenuity.

The officers we wish to attract to our town are not average candidates, but ones with talents and strengths not frequently associated with the profession. It is vital to the quality of life of our citizens and the economic health of our community that we engage and hold onto such individuals, and this will require long term investment.

I would also urge you to please keep in mind as you deliberate, the field of policing is especially volatile. It is very easy for an officer, once certified and minimally experienced, to find employment. This situation is particularly true right now, with historically low unemployment along with the precarious reputation of law enforcement in our culture. Very few qualified individuals are drawn to the career, and those that are can choose to work almost wherever they please – in Vermont or beyond. Middlebury is competing in a highly aggressive market.

Thank you for your attention – and for all your work on behalf of our community. It is deeply appreciated.