

# Leland Residents Support Plan To Form Northern Police Force

BY TERRY POPE

Some Leland residents say they are willing to pay higher taxes to support a police department in northern Brunswick County.

About 40 people attended a meeting with the Leland Town Council last Thursday, March 5, to discuss how the town can get police protection at an affordable cost.

"We do need one," said resident Lucille Blake. "We need one 24 hours a day."

The N.C. Institute of Government estimates it costs approximately \$250,000 a year to staff and equip six officers. That would allow one on-duty officer to patrol around the clock. Leland's tax rate is 5 cents per \$100 of property valuation, which brings in approximately \$18,000 per year.

Town officials allocated \$50,000 for the 1991-92 fiscal year for a police department, said Mayor S.L. Doty. The town's total estimated annual revenue is about \$280,000, including funds from the state, with approximately \$83,000 restricted for certain uses such as street maintenance and sanitation.

In September, the town hired a police chief who planned to set up an auxiliary force of officers in training, but John McCarthy resigned two months later. The former New York City policeman was un-certified in North Carolina, prompting criticism from some members of the council. He had planned to work on recertification while forming the department.

Officials from the towns of Navassa and Belville have agreed to study a possible joint venture with each town paying its share.

"I think it's possible that we can cut that substantially," Belville Mayor Ken Messer said of the \$250,000 figure. "Somewhere in there is a good common sense figure that might work and would give us 24-hour a day coverage."

Messer, who is also a detective with the Brunswick County Sheriff's Department, said Belville wants to help form a police department, not because its crime rate is close to that of Leland's, but because the community needs to pull together.

The Leland community loses an estimated \$1 million in property per year to thieves and vandals, he said. "We know the area needs it, and we're willing to do our share," said Messer.

Those in the audience laughed when Doty reported the county

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—Ken Messer, Belville Mayor

wants \$100 per hour to hire sheriff's deputies to patrol the town.

"You don't have to beg to the county," said Messer. "You have the capability to go forward."

Tom Hunter, a Shallotte detective and volunteer police chief for the town of Sandy Creek near Maco, said when it comes to setting up police protection towns usually get what they pay for.

"You need law enforcement in this area," said Hunter. "If you try to do it with one or two men, I think you're selling yourself short. You can't do it on a part-time basis."

A town like Sandy Creek, which reported just three break-ins in 1990, is a good training ground for a volunteer auxiliary force, said Hunter.

"You get three break-ins an hour up here," he added. "You don't want a Cadillac, but you don't want an old clunker either."

Others said they don't think \$250,000 is too much to pay for police protection.

"You get what you pay for," said Mrs. Blake. "If you expect a good, quality police department, you're going to have to pay for it."

A non-resident property owner, V.A. Creech Jr., suggested the towns should contract to hire a sheriff's deputy to patrol first before forming a department.

"I believe that if one man was available at night..." said Creech, "his presence and moving around would be a strong deterrent to crime in the Leland area. At least try that before you go the whole gamut."

Gordon Hobbs said his home has been hit by gunfire and his niece's home broken into.

"We need to do something," said Hobbs. "I don't mind paying the tax increase. If you keep on doing what you've always done, then you're going to keep on getting what you've got. And I don't like what I've got right now."

Three break-ins have cost resident Jimmy Cook an estimated \$13,000 in property.

"The sheriff's department is doing all they can do with what they've got," said Cook, a former deputy.

One deputy now patrols the northern Brunswick County district, an area with boundaries from Sunny Point, to Town Creek to the Columbus County line, said Sheriff's Sgt. Gene Browning. Each of the five shifts has four road deputies and one desk sergeant, who doesn't leave the office, to cover the county.

"There is a lot more crime going on in the Leland area than people realize," said Donald Gilbert.

Sheriff John Carr Davis said he is willing to work with the northern towns, no matter what they decide to do, to help improve police protection in that area.

Doty said the meeting was held to gather input from citizens before the council holds a workshop, to be scheduled later, on possibly forming a police department.

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