

Deerfield Safety Service Needs *Finding a Way Forward*

A NH Listens Summary Report
January 13, 2017



ABOUT NH LISTENS



New Hampshire Listens is a civic engagement initiative of the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire.

Our mission:

To bring people together for engaged conversations

Our work:

- Create engaged community conversations on local and statewide issues
- Serve as a resource and support network for new local Listens groups
- Cultivate a network of facilitators for public engagement and action

Our principles:

- Bring people together from all walks of life
- Provide time for in-depth, informed conversations
- Respect differences as well as seek common ground
- Achieve outcomes that lead to informed community solutions

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Background

Over the past decade, several ballot initiatives for additional safety buildings in Deerfield, New Hampshire have been defeated. Last year, the Select Board completed a community survey regarding safety buildings. Before moving forward with any additional specific proposals, the Select Board sponsored a review and discussion of safety service needs in Deerfield. An active group of volunteers comprised of Deerfield residents worked with New Hampshire Listens from fall 2015 to fall 2016 to design a community conversation about the future of safety services in Deerfield. The conversation was intended to help residents move toward resolution of outstanding concerns about how best to meet the town's safety needs.

The conversations—open to anyone who wanted to attend—were held on Saturday, November 12, 2016, from 9:30 to 12:00 noon. This event followed months of research and outreach by a town-sponsored steering committee. Save the date information and flyers were shared through a variety of methods in the community (flyer may be found in Appendix A). Several committee members visited civic groups from the Parents-Teachers Organization to the gardening club to talk about the issue and this event. The event was also promoted on town-related Facebook sites, in the local online paper, and by word-of-mouth. To inform their understanding of the current situation, many members of the community visited the fire, rescue, and police stations at open houses held before the event. A few weeks prior to the event, the Deerfield Safety Services Committee sent an information mailer to each Deerfield household (Appendix B). Around forty people registered in advance and over sixty-five people attended. Participants in the conversations spent two hours in a facilitated, small group discussion about their priorities and concerns for Deerfield's future safety needs.

Questions to Explore

The Deerfield Safety Services Steering Committee and NH Listens worked collaboratively to develop a set of key questions to guide the discussion. The full discussion guide may be found in Appendix C. Key questions explored were:

- What are the most important things to consider for meeting Deerfield's current and future safety needs?
- What priorities should be considered by decision makers?
- How well are the needs of the town met by the current facilities?
- What do we know about trends for the future?
- What are the pros and cons of keeping things the same?

These community conversations help to augment (not replace) traditional forms of government and policy making. What follows is a detailed description of the outcomes of the conversations and an analysis of all small group notes (found in Appendix D). These results help decision makers identify areas for further consideration and action. The results of the conversations, as presented in this report, are intended to be shared with all those who participated, as well as with Deerfield's Safety Services Steering Committee and Board of Selectmen. The full report with appendices may be found at carsey.unh.edu/nhlistens/reports.

Key Findings

Participants at the conversation on the future of safety services for Deerfield expressed a range of perspectives, all of which were recorded by facilitators. Over about two hours, seven small groups—each with a trained facilitator—identified the most important issues. The summary below and the small group notes reveal strong overall themes as well as a rich collection of specific ideas. Included in the conversation were some of the ways residents of Deerfield enjoy the rural, historic, small-town character of their town where one can know the names of police officers and neighbors, and get involved in community service and decision making. The primary themes that stood out across groups and conversations included a realization that the status quo is not an option, a desire for a “Yankee solution,” and the need for ongoing engagement and information sharing.

The Status Quo Is Not an Option

As participants familiarized themselves with information and took advantage of the opportunity to ask questions directly of Safety Services staff, many shared a growing realization that the present Safety Services facilities are inadequate and unsafe in ways that leave Deerfield vulnerable to liability concerns and unnecessary risk. Because of this, many expressed the need for some sort of action to be taken.

The kinds of concerns mentioned most included liability and risk related to: privacy and confidentiality; safety for public, volunteers, and staff; response time slowed down by proximity to library parking; co-location of police with youth programs; and the risk of being sued. In addition, concerns related to recruitment of staff and volunteers and future growth and demographic changes were discussed by most groups.

Regarding the Police Department being in a multi-use building, many participants expressed concern about being in the same building as the children in the day care/after-school program. Many also concurred with the NH Primex Insurance report that there should be separate bathroom facilities for Police Department detainees.

The impact of facilities on staff and volunteers was acknowledged and discussed. One consequence of the challenges facing Deerfield’s safety services may be increased difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff and volunteers, especially if the conditions of the existing facilities make jobs more difficult or unsafe. Currently, police, fire, and rescue staff members are working hard to make their facilities work—rather than the facilities working for them. Many felt that safety personnel should feel as though they have what they need to do their jobs well.

Finally, anticipated growth in Deerfield impacted participant perceptions of need. According to current demographic information, Deerfield is growing and anticipates continued growth, especially among older adults and young families. This growth will have implications for emergency services. Ending co-location of the police department with after-school care, attending to response time, and being mindful of the historic district were all mentioned as important when considering mid- and long-term solutions. Four of the seven small groups prioritized the Police Department while two groups identified the Fire Department as having more pressing concerns.

A “Yankee Solution”

As participants recognized the need to take action, many were seeking a “Yankee Solution.” In other words, there was a consensus that cost and solutions should reasonably meet needs rather than wants, and should consider a balance of all options, including phased construction. Each small group called for careful planning and additional research regarding safety service needs for Deerfield.

Financial considerations were raised by all groups. Participants conveyed that any plan presented to voters should reflect future needs. Some stated that they would like to see a twenty- to thirty-year plan. Some suggested a phased solution, which can be completed (and paid for) in parts versus a lump sum, thereby eliminating a one-time tax impact. In addition, concerns included land costs, operational and maintenance costs—not just construction.

Some noted that there are currently no competing projects in Deerfield. In the future, other projects (such as an upgrade to the school) will take priority. The lack of competing projects was seen as an opportunity to address this long-standing issue.

Some of the specific issues participants were interested in seeing explored include town comparisons, a building inventory, and more research on the impact of a shared facility. Looking to other, comparable towns to see what has been done successfully regarding facilities, best practices, and staffing could help residents gain perspective. Nottingham was mentioned as a specific example because the town recently built a new safety complex. Participants also called for an inventory of available Deerfield land and buildings that could perhaps be used to house one or more of the safety services. This inventory should include consideration of the VFW Hall, the Fire Department building at the fairgrounds, and the current Fire Department central station. Finally, there was a desire to determine, after gaining the above information, whether to pursue a single safety complex or separate buildings. While there was agreement that “we don’t need or want the Taj Mahal,” there was also consensus that additional information was needed before deciding on stand-alone facilities versus a shared facility complex.

Ongoing Community Engagement and Information Sharing

The third and final overarching theme indicated a desire for the ongoing engagement of residents. Participants discussed next steps and what would help decision makers move forward successfully. Many felt the community must be engaged during the entire planning and research process as the town works to address safety service needs. Town-wide communication is a constant challenge, but thorough outreach needs to be done so that all residents—and not just the small group who attended this event—are informed before they are being asked to vote to spend money on these necessary improvements. To help keep the community informed through this process, it was suggested that there be a group to oversee this process, and that this group should be diverse and represent Deerfield well.

Participant Attendance and Evaluation Summary

NH Listens gathers basic demographic data to provide information on who was interested and able to attend this event about Safety Services in Deerfield. It's important to note that the content of this report has been generated from the people who attended the event and, consequently, does not represent all voices or viewpoints in Deerfield. Still, the demographic information presented here from the event indicates a healthy mix of backgrounds and experiences, ensuring that the conversations summarized in this report have great value.

Of the 67 people who attended the conversation, 42 completed a participant evaluation (62.6%). Forms from 7 individuals were excluded because they preferred their answers not to be included in research. Participants ranged in age from 35 to 82 with an almost even representation of men and women. When it came to political leanings, 22.5 percent of the group identified as political moderates, 25 percent as conservative or somewhat conservative, and 52.5 percent as liberal or somewhat liberal. The conversations were overwhelmingly rated strongly as helping participants become better informed about the issues being discussed, providing a better understanding of points of view that differ from their own, and being facilitated in ways that did not impose ideas or values on the group. A full summary of the participant evaluation may be found in Appendix E.

Conclusion

A mix of engaged residents from the Deerfield community participated in this community conversation about safety service needs in Deerfield. Participants with a range of ages, educational backgrounds, and political perspectives were represented at the event. Attendees' final recommendations and key areas of concern can be used by decision makers to ground next steps in ideas and issues that were prioritized in a process that promoted give and take as well as informed problem solving.

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