

To: Town Manager and Town Council
From: Chief Rick Thomas
Date: May 12, 2025
Subject: School Resource Officers

Please accept this memo as input regarding the School Resource Officer (SRO) positions in Howey-in-the-Hills. I was not aware that the Town Manager and Mayor would be submitting a letter opposing the SRO contract, so I apologize for not providing this perspective sooner.

[While this omission is understood, it is important to reiterate that the decision to review the SRO agreement was communicated in advance and discussed as part of the Town's broader budget priorities. Input from all department heads is always welcome during the budget cycle.]

Upon review, I find that the financial data presented by the Finance Supervisor reflects broad averages and may not accurately represent the actual cost to the town. I am happy to provide more detailed calculations if the Council would like further clarification.

[The financial figures presented were based on actual reimbursement and expenditure data for the first half of FY24–25, with use of those actuals to calculate the costs for the remainder of the year. While variations in individual costs may occur, the \$100,000 shortfall represents a persistent annual trend that is neither new nor anomalous.]

It was also noted that during the summer months, the town receives fewer hours of service from the SRO if he/she work the summer program. While this is accurate, it also results in a proportional reduction in cost to the town through a separate contract.

[This is correct. However, that separate contract applies to one of the three SROs. Moreover, the separate summer contract offers lower reimbursement rates—excluding key cost components like health care, pension, and FICA—making it an even less financially viable model. Even with this adjustment, the total hours available to serve the Town remain significantly limited across the year.]

For those on the Council familiar with my service, you are aware that I strongly support continuing the SRO program. Several key benefits include:

- Additional manpower for coverage during special events, officer leave, or illness.
- Without SROs, the Howey-in-the-Hills Police Department will still be required to respond to school-related incidents, which may result in removing the only on-duty officer from town patrol.
- A safe and secure school environment directly supports a safe and secure town. Utilizing our department for SRO duties promotes seamless coordination across all town safety operations.

[These operational arguments are appreciated. The argument goes both ways, though; the manpower for vacancies, mandatory training, vacation, or illness created by SROs is a corresponding draw on the road patrol officers, as well, and is prioritized contractually over

the needs of the Town. Every contractually-required hour of coverage provided to the schools is simultaneously a potential vacancy left unfilled on our Town's roads, requiring overtime or a burden on our Lieutenant. This is a zero-sum deployment issue, not an expansion of resources. Additionally, operational arguments must be weighed against the financial burden and limited applicability to Howey residents. With only five students across all three campuses residing within town limits—and zero in two of the three schools—the Town's general taxpayer base is funding a service with very limited direct benefit. It is also worth noting that responding to school incidents remains a law enforcement obligation regardless of who staffs the campus.]

The town has already invested in vehicles, uniforms, and equipment for these officers. These officers also remain on-call for emergencies, even while assigned to schools.

[True, though the sunk costs of equipment cannot justify continuing annual net losses. Additionally, being "on-call" does not resolve the fundamental issue that these officers are not actively deployed in the Town during core hours.]

While concerns have been raised about officer pay and retention, terminating an officer—particularly one who is a town resident—will harm employee morale. In my opinion, the town's modest financial investment yields substantial public safety benefits.

[To be clear, non-renewal of the SRO contract is not synonymous with termination, or even attrition, which would be a separate discussion. The item for discussion at the council meeting is simply the contract itself; personnel and budget are separate discussions. The primary point of concern is that the \$100,000 annual differential is not a modest expense relative to the Town's total personnel budget.]

Should the Town Council choose to terminate the agreement with Lake County Schools to reallocate approximately \$100,000 in the budget, I respectfully request that the currently employed officer remain with the department. The other two vacant positions could remain unfilled for the time being. This would enable coverage across day and evening shifts, with some overlap at night. One-officer coverage is insufficient and increasingly unsafe, particularly given the town's growth and increased traffic volume.

[This is a separate question from the agenda item this evening, which is simply the contract itself. If Council opts for non-renewal of the SRO contract, personnel and budget will be follow-up conversations. That being said, it makes sense to continue to maintain the one position on the road patrol for the remainder of the fiscal year.]

Maintaining a minimum of six full-time officers, in addition to the Chief and Lieutenant, would provide basic coverage needed for day-to-day operation and during absences while allowing us to address competitive pay concerns with all of the current police department staff.

[Agreed in principle, although best practices based on population would be 2 to 2.5 officers per thousand, or 4-5 officers. This realignment is precisely what non-renewal is intended to support: redeploying resources toward sustainable core services and internal staff]

development. Please note also that there would not be any financial savings with the remaining SRO officer being converted to road patrol, but the hours spent serving the Town would dramatically increase, with the overall cost remaining the same.]

Finally, I would remind the Council that the Chief and Lieutenant carry numerous responsibilities uncommon for their counterparts in other agencies—such as evidence handling, fleet and records management, procurement, background investigations, events, investigations, IST, and grant oversight. When staffing is reduced, it becomes increasingly difficult to fulfill our administrative and operational duties effectively and accurately.

[In fact, adding administrative work due to an expanded number of officers in the field is an additional burden on the admin staff. Rather than easing administrative burdens, the SRO program has repeatedly required the Lieutenant to cover extended vacancies, increasing strain on the department's leadership and undercutting its effectiveness. No reduction in administrative personnel is being proposed. What is under review is a strategic reassignment of field personnel to improve local coverage and reduce externally subsidized commitments. The Town must prioritize operational capacity within its jurisdiction.]

I am available to provide additional information or clarification if requested.

Sincerely,
Chief H. Rick Thomas