

The Use of Howey Police Officers as School Resource Officers

The contract with the School Board of Lake County for the School Resource Officer program is scheduled for renewal for the 2025-2026 school year. I am recommending that the council vote **not** to renew this contract. Declining to renew would allow us the option to redirect the cost of funding this program to increase the salaries and benefits of our road patrol officers in the upcoming budget year.

As background, the School Board's year runs from July to June, which is why the contract is coming before council on the May 12 agenda. The contract proposes placing one Howey police officer, as currently provided, in each of the following schools:

1. Lake Hills School;
2. Academy at Lake Hills North; and
3. Lake Success Academy.

Notably, only five children (of 281 total students) attending the three schools live within the town limits. There are no Howey children in Lake Hills North or Lake Success. (Data provided by Lake County Schools)

The School Board of Lake County reimburses the town only for a portion of the personnel costs of the officers: salaries, FICA, pension contributions, and health insurance, and only for the ten months of the year while school is in session. The School Board does not reimburse the town for the cost of police vehicles, fuel, repairs, uniforms, body armor, equipment, the cost of recruiting, screening, training, radios, phones, or email accounts, coverage for accrued vacation and sick leave, or for salaries and benefits for the other two months while school is not in session.

According to the data analysis by Oscar Ojeda, the Finance Supervisor, taking into account the current level of reimbursement from the School Board, the three officers are costing the town approximately **\$100,000 a year, above and beyond the reimbursement** paid by the School Board of Lake County. This is effectively a subsidy to a larger government entity and adds a burden on the town taxpayers who already pay property taxes to the School Board (6.122 mills) in addition to the property taxes paid to the town.

The costs this school year (SY 24-25) are broken down as follows:

- The personnel cost for the three officers is around \$280,000 per year with actual reimbursement to date of \$100,450 (first 2 quarters) with anticipated reimbursement being \$185,830 to \$200,900 for the entire school year.
- The operations and maintenance cost for these three officers is estimated to be in excess of \$20,000 annually.
- Each officer receives 13 days of vacation time and 13 days of sick time annually, creating scheduling gaps that require costly overtime or the reassignment of Lt. Giddens.
- The current amount of accrued vacation time for the three officers is over \$9,500.
- The town also pays for 11 days of holiday time.

- Officers also take their vehicles home, which adds approximately 15,000 miles to the vehicles per year, with a cost of around \$11,000 for gas, repairs and depreciation for the transit alone.

It is also important to point out that, if the town does not provide the three School Resource Officers, they will be provided by another law enforcement agency. The children will continue to be protected. For instance, the City of Umatilla has three schools (Elementary, Middle and High) within its city limits, and the School Resource Officer for each of those three schools is covered by the Sheriff's Office and not by the city. This is in line with Section 1006.12 of the Florida Statutes which does not mandate that the town provides School Resource Officers.

As Mayor and as a resident, I am very pro-police. I believe strongly that a portion of the \$100,000 savings can be used to solve a problem in the town: police officer retention. Since I was elected in November 2024, I have attended two swearing-in ceremonies for new officers. We currently have one officer who has just left to join Astatula and another, a current School Resource Officer, who is looking to join Mt. Dora. This revolving door of officers leaving the town is a long-standing problem. Since 2021, the town has lost nine full-time officers.

This pattern of attrition comes at a high cost. Recruiting, training, and equipping new officers is both expensive and time intensive. The funds currently used to subsidize the SRO program could be more strategically deployed to increase the wages and benefits of our road patrol officers, who serve our residents directly. Staff are also researching options to enhance the benefits package, including potential participation in the Florida Retirement System (FRS) and improvements to our health insurance options. A redirection of the funds used for the SRO program would significantly support those efforts and, by extension, help stabilize the department.

Given the financial burden to the Town, the absence of a statutory mandate, and the clear need to improve officer retention, I urge the Council to **vote against renewal of the 2025–2026 SRO contract**. This decision will allow us to reinvest in our core police force and better serve the residents of Howey-in-the-Hills.

Graham Wells
Mayor