

**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.

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.

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.

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.

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. 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.

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.

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.

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.

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

Sincerely,

Chief H. Rick Thomas