

TOWN OF WILLINGTON

BOARD OF SELECTMEN Special Meeting Minutes

Board of Selectmen
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**Town Office Building
Selectmen's Conference Room**

**May 27, 2020
6:30 PM**

First Selectwoman Wiecenski called the meeting to order at 6:30 PM with several residents, Lieutenant Robert Palmer of the Connecticut State Police, Selectmen Boritz & Blessington.

First Selectwoman Wiecenski began the meeting offering condolences to the DeMers family and all of those affected by the horrific events of last Friday morning. She then added that this meeting has been called to discuss the events so our residents can have some understanding of the process that took place over the weekend. Residents were asked to voice their concerns via email submission in which they would be discussed. First Selectwoman Wiecenski noted that we received many email submissions as well as phone calls and the Selectmen hear their concerns.

First Selectwoman Wiecenski noted that this is not going to be a onetime meeting; but rather an ongoing process and she is going to work until we have something to communicate to our residents.

Lieutenant Robert Palmer of Connecticut State Police Troop C was present and was asked to give some details of the events that took place. Lt. Palmer confirmed that the incident was reported to CSP (Connecticut State Police) at 9:01 AM on Friday and the first troopers were on scene within 7 minutes. They determined that the nature of the injuries sustained required assistance from the Eastern District Major Crimes Squad as well as detectives from Troop C. Major Crime Squad immediately began their investigation as the victims were transported to the hospital and the State's Attorney arrived on scene. Lt. Palmer clarified that he was not on scene in Willington at that time; but came in shortly after the call; noting that there was another incident in the town of Somers where he was at the time.

The investigation was managed by Eastern Division Major Crime Squad and they were out there until 4:30 AM on Saturday morning. Lt. Palmer stated that the information being developed during that time was extremely chaotic. They were trying to put information together to the best of their knowledge and it was very challenging. The Major Crime Squad were relaying and managing the info based on the investigation as it unfolded. A press conference was getting ready to be held at the Town Office Building shortly after he arrived in Willington. There were a number of social media posts that had also gone out through town.

Lt. Palmer added once he arrived in Willington the police were receiving a large number of responses by the community at large and the troop were following leads of every type of 2-wheeled motorcycles of every kind from Stafford through Tolland and into Somers. It appeared as if the word was out at that time. Troop C had a dedicated presence throughout the night in the area.

A significant number of K-9s were also sent out to search a 1,200 square acres in the area where the motorcycle was recovered. That particular search went from Saturday morning through Saturday evening; till dark. Sunday morning; the Troop received word of a stolen vehicle that belonged in Willington; which led them to investigate the situation that occurred on Turnpike Road. Lt. Palmer noted at this point the FBI is involved and they have received assistance from other local and state agencies as well. There was a large number of reports coming in from the community about possible sightings. The troopers had a significant number of interaction with residents

as they patrolled the area and interviewed people to seek more information as well. Lt. Palmer clarified that some of the info beyond that is investigative in nature and is kept out of the public eye. He cautioned that some of the information is unconfirmed; some is speculation and some is part of a larger investigation and cannot be released at this time. He also noted that he read a news article and added that there is information in the article that did not come from the State Police. The press can report what they have been told from whomever they choose to interview. Whether or not that is accurate is a different story and the timelines overlapped.

Lt. Palmer then clarified that the moment the incident occurred; they were on scene very quickly and the investigation was extremely fluent. They are still gathering information as to why the individual in question was in the area.

First Selectwoman Wiczenski noted that we received many emails and she read every one of their concerns. The biggest concern coming from our residents was asking why an alert was not sent out. Lt. Palmer clarified that they were in direct contact with the First Selectman to the best of their ability. She was advocating on the towns behalf asking questions which she felt the need to. In the early stage sending a reverse 911 call would have amounted to a description of an individual wearing a certain type of clothing and a certain type of motorcycle and that is all we would have been able to give folks at the time. There was no indication at that time if it was a male or female or demographics – there was not enough information to tell people to be looking for. There was also question whether the person could still be in the area. There was a point leading up to the press conference where the CSP was gathering information to the best of their ability to pass along to the public. They were also under the impression that people were aware because they were getting several phone calls throughout the town about motorcycles and leads in town. Lt. Palmer clarified that there was not enough concrete information to operate with. It was also believed once the press conference was out there that the word was out.

Selectwoman Boritz stated that she did not personally know of the incident until a bit later when her daughter heard from friends. It isn't so much of what the individual looked like; but rather that the town went so long without knowing that someone was causing harm and running loose. It would have been nice to let our residents know of the potential danger. Lt. Palmer stated that they are taking note of this and will come up with a plan so in the future if information need to get out; no matter what – we can get it out and to the most amount of people. He then clarified that some of the information was not released immediately because the police were trying to establish who needed to know about the injured person and the immediate needs for the family. An investigation was also happening to get as much information as possible. Part of the investigation was also to see if the individual had fled or was still in the area. The nature of the incident was chaotic. There is no protocol of when these types of alerts should go out. The people who are running the investigation are trying to determine the best action and multi-tasking as well. Lt. Palmer then added it is now clear that the word did not get as widely as anticipated they had. This is something they need to account for going forward.

Lt. Palmer then cautioned if an alert was sent that something bad was happening; but with no concrete information; would cause an avalanche of phone calls not only to the Town but the barracks as well. The thought process was to hold off for a little to get something concrete to put out so people would understand what was going on.

First Selectwoman Wiczenski then added it is important to recognize that not everyone uses social media; so the reverse 911 would give us the ability to reach hopefully everybody in our community. Some of the other concerns from our residents were asking why Derby was given a reverse 911; but not us. She noted that one of the first things she asked Lt. Palmer on Friday was if we need to shelter in place or send out a reverse 911; the resident's safety was in the forefront. It was the info that came from there is what we relied on. She then asked Lt. Palmer why the reverse 911 happened so fast in Derby; but not here?

Lt. Palmer clarified that he is unsure whether the reverse 911 call went out from the state or local PD. In certain areas; town have access to the system; and other areas (such as here) rely on mutual aid (like Tolland County 911); and he is not sure who put that call out. It is obviously something they will need to work on. He added erring on the side of caution, that it is a very difficult decision making process of what information gets out there.

Sometimes it seems cut and dry; but at times when they are determining what is happening; and what is unconfirmed; could end up being a significant issue afterwards; if it is not accurate. Lt. Palmer then clarified that the town of Willington was never left unattended; as a matter of fact; they had extra troopers on site.

The FBI is now involved and another Major Crime Squad is performing a different investigation in Derby; but he does not have any further information as to what decisions were made down there.

First Selectwoman Wiczenski added that another disturbing set of emails came from a few residents who said they had called Troop C asking for information about the case to be told that they should contact our Resident State Trooper; oh you don't have one – you didn't want to pay for one; so that's what you get. She asked Lt. Palmer if he could speak to that. She is hopeful when our residents call that someone at Troop C is not responding to anyone in that manner. It should have no bearing on the service that we received; and it needs to be addressed.

Selectwoman Boritz then added that she would like to see the inconsistencies in the time line be addressed as well. First Selectwoman Wiczenski stated that she had a conference call with Lt. Palmer and Sgt. Aiello earlier today and the error stating that the picture of the suspect was shown on Friday evening; when in fact it wasn't shown until Saturday morning. She spoke with Lt. Palmer at 8:17 on Saturday morning; asking if there was any further information they could release and she was told they did not but believed something would be released later; in which was the photo. She added that she wanted clarification on that as well; because it does not align with the released timeline.

Selectman Blessington noted that the people don't need to know the name and phone number of the perpetrator a half hour after the incident happens; but they do need to know the incident occurred. He doesn't understand how it did not happen. He heard about it about 4 hours later; from a neighbor. First Selectwoman Wiczenski noted that her first interaction was information that there was an assault and she had been in touch with Lt. Palmer; who was not on site – Lt. Palmer then had to connect with authorities who were on site to give more details to her office. When she connected with him; he let her know that one of the victims had deceased and changed the nature of the crime at that point. She clarified that she did not have any details in her office until the press conference was held outside the TOB. She added that she was not monitoring social media nor did we have anyone in the TOB watching either. We attended the press conference held outside and then we put together the info from that press conference to send an eblast through town. Looking back; the only best option would have been to send out a reverse 911 call. She understands those concerns now. She added if she knew everything on Friday; that she knows today; she would have made different decisions; and she can't change what was done.

First Selectwoman Wiczenski told the Selectmen that they need to hold discussions of what they think should be put in place for the future to help our residents feel safe. It may take some time; but do we work on our own system? We would still need to work with police to be sure we put out accurate info that is important. It also means that our residents would have to sign up for the program to be able to access everyone. She added that she was told that the reverse 911 only works with landlines. Emergency Management Director Stuart Cobb was present. He noted that cell phones can be added to the system; and they would also indicate what town they are from; which would allow the messages that pertain to that area that they are in.

Lt. Palmer referenced the discrepancy about the timeline – which the information that was released is inaccurate; this is because multiple districts are updating the document; and is in the process of being amended by PIO. He then clarified that no photos of the suspect were sent out until Saturday morning. In addition; he stated that this is the first he has heard of any citizen being given anything less than the utmost respect and responsiveness when calling the Barracks. He noted that all calls are taped when they come in (especially the 911 calls). He urged the people who had complaints of that to give him the date and time the call was made and he will review them. Lt. Palmer clarified whether or not any particular town has a Resident Trooper is irrelevant to them. Lt. Aiello relayed the gesture in a previous meeting; and said that the State Police take this very personally that someone dared to commit such an act in the areas that they are responsible for. Lt. Palmer added that our Troopers live out here; they live in Willington and are keenly aware of the need to respond.

The first troopers were on scene within 7 minutes of the 911 call. If anyone called our Barracks and did not get an appropriate response he would like the date and time it occurred so he can take appropriate action.

First Selectwoman Wiecenski then asked Lt. Palmer (based on some questions) if there is any chance he will return to Willington? Lt. Palmer stated that there doesn't appear to be any reason for him to return to Willington; however he has deep ties to Connecticut (in Newtown). Since he has crossed state lines; the FBI has taken a more robust position in the investigation. There have been a multitude of search warrants. They are trying to determine whether or not he would return to the state; let alone the town of Willington. He added he would be remiss to say he is not coming back here. It will be difficult for him to move around freely and Troop C Barracks will position themselves to be immediately responsive and on the lookout for a return if it happens.

First Selectwoman Wiecenski stated that residents are looking to see why roadblocks weren't set up or used in any of the areas; such as Turnpike Road. Why wasn't that area locked down. Lt. Palmer stated that one of the things they struggled with was the amount of personnel available. They brought in additional manpower and the best way to manage was to move people around. If they were to block off the highway; they would need a certain amount of Troopers to be stationed at the Eastbound and Westbound ramps. He added every time they had positioned people; they would get a call with a new lead; which would require them to move them around again. In addition; they were looking in a massive geographic area; they didn't have enough people.

Selectman Blessington said we are going back to the delay in notifying the residents that there was danger. One of the emails said that they did not know if he left town or not. Selectman Blessington said he would assume that he would still be here until we knew for certain that he had left town; erring on the side of caution. Lt. Palmer clarified that they were operating on multiple potential outcomes. It was just as likely as he was in town; so they brought in additional resources as quickly as possible. Despite the fact that they believed the word was out; they will take away from this. Now knowing the social media path was simply not enough. Selectman Blessington then asked if they will release the outcome of their investigation so the people of Willington can see? He added it would be a big help in order to re-establish trust.

First Selectwoman Wiecenski acknowledged our residents who have put together a vigil that will be held on the Town Green. They are asking residents to bring a candle in glass jars tonight and tomorrow night from 7 – 9:30. Our town is a tight community that comes together when someone is in need. Keep those involved in your prayers. She also thanked everyone who stepped up to put this together.

First Selectwoman Wiecenski noted that someone had commented asking if the activity on Mirtl Road took away from resources in other areas. She noted that it was a crime scene at that point.

Selectwoman Boritz noted that she received many personal emails and also saw statements from residents in neighboring towns; such as Ashford and Mansfield; wanting to know why no notification had been issued. She stated that whatever we plan on implementing should be put in place regionally since we are so close together. First Selectwoman Wiecenski noted that she was on a conference call this morning regarding that; noting that Tolland and Mansfield already have something in place; but Ashford is much like us; where neither of us have a resident trooper nor a communication program. She added that she thinks there is a bigger conversation to have (other than just the Selectmen) and she added she hopes this never happens again. She is hoping to fix the holes.

First Selectwoman Wiecenski noted whether we go with Everbridge or reverse 911; we are going to have to make sure that everyone signs up for it – especially our elderly; who may not see a social media post or an email. She added that there is a much broader conversation to have here; noting that she would like to set up a committee made up of community members; emergency management and the State Police. She would like to start working towards positive changes.

Lt. Palmer (who was disconnected and had to call in) referenced Selectman Blessington's request for an incident report. He said yes, there will be an after action review; but it will not be available right away; however when it is

developed, it goes up the chain of command and then released. He noted it might be more important for the State Police to provide Willington with the fact that they followed up with the town in this manner and key people in town.

First Selectwoman Wiecenski asked if there are any future patrols planned for the Mirtl Road area going forward. Lt. Palmer noted that this investigation is ongoing and they have been continuously out there and in addition; there will be ongoing and aggressive patrols through the town of Willington. He then told First Selectwoman Wiecenski to let him know if she sees the need for even more robust presence; and he can adjust accordingly.

First Selectwoman Wiecenski then noted that another popular email comment was the reference of the incident being isolated and in addition errors with the PIO in the press conference; for example Route 20 was referenced; instead of Route 320. They were not corrected or changed. Lt. Palmer noted that Police could not identify a reason for anyone to be in that area; given its location. No one had any idea of who it could be or why they were there; thus noting it was suspected as isolated at the beginning. He added as far as the referencing of the roads; they don't always catch typos of routes and streets that are put out. The information will be accurately updated along with the timeline.

Lt. Palmer stated that he knows there is a desire for people to understand why this happened. He cautioned that the Police are beholden to trying to find out what happened and confirm details with regard to the evidence they are collecting. Many times they are unable to answer why it happened in that moment. He added it is their hope that this individual is caught and he explains what happened and why. Sharing any of the information without any confirmation of accuracy would be a disservice to the town and the victims' families and that is something that they just cannot do.

Selectwoman Boritz said we are very much in that place where we want to know; and we do not like to be in a place of uncertainty; however we have to for the time being. There was a lot of activity on line (ie: Facebook) over the weekend; which was a blessing and a curse at the same time. The blessing was that most of us were made known to keep our kids inside. If there wasn't such a strong network of communication; that speaks to how connected we are; but she warned that there are also moments that were shared in conjecture. She noted it is hard for us to separate the information that is fact versus the information that comes through other sources. There are many things we feel we know (because we have heard it through various sources); but she said we just have to live with the uncertainty right now. Selectwoman Boritz added that she wants everyone to be careful because there is so much conjecture flying around and it is not helping in this time of stress and anxiety. First Selectwoman Wiecenski added that everyone should be mindful of that. Lt. Palmer added that the Police are aware that a tremendous amount of information is blowing through the networks and they are researching to see if any of it has value but they are also tamping down things that are inaccurate. He added that they struggled with the social media piece on that first day – if someone was watching social media or if the individual was getting information from outside sources then it would be like he was being fed their investigative sources; and could slip through whatever net they were trying to put over the area. Some things were transparent; but there was an effort to not divulge any efforts they were making so the person would not have the benefit of being forewarned.

First Selectwoman Wiecenski noted that some of our residents noted they want to make sure the first responders who arrived at the scene are doing ok. Lt. Palmer said he is appreciative of that. One of the things that will happen will be a critical incident stress management debrief that the CSP peer support program will put on. This will include the first responders of the town as well as law enforcement. There is already something in the works.

Selectman Blessington noted that we are getting off of the subject. We solicited email input before this meeting. he counted over 56 responses and read every one. Two were not relevant; two responses noted the CSP handled this very well and the other 52 were really angry. The thing they were angry about is that their kids were out in the lawn; there was a crazed guy going around town with a machete and they were not being told. This is where the failure came in. For tonight this is all we need to know. We have heard plenty from Lt. Palmer and he think he is telling us this that this was an "oops" and we need to find out why. For the town the same thing. Some people

recommended setting up a task force to make recommendations. He added he supposes it is a good idea – but do we know what the recommendations will be in the end? He said he has an idea – that we need to get something like reverse 911 or Ever bridge put in place. Then the Town Government would decide when and where to use. He then added that this was not an everyday occurrence – it was one in a million thing. First Selectwoman Wicewski said it does not hurt to broaden the conversation and figure out what software to buy and put our own protocols in place. She added we can always do better so this doesn't happen again. We learned from this and have room to improve here. In addition she heard mention that we need a resident state trooper – maybe we should talk about what they could do for us. There was another comment to look at; study and make a recommendation. Another was suggesting setting up a task force made up of law enforcement; EMS, BOS board of Ed board of finance to determine what can be done to make Willington safer; make realistic recommendations; advocate for needed funds and put solutions in place. First Selectwoman Wicewski noted that this is important. If we don't put protocols in place and know what we want to do and how we want to do would be a disservice.

Selectman Blessington said he thinks we are overdoing it. First Selectwoman Wicewski warned that she does not think she can overdo our community that is hurting and feels unsafe. If you read these comments; these people do not feel safe in their own homes. They are angry and we need to do better by them; this is not overdoing it at all. Selectwoman Boritz noted that the initial communication was lacking but ongoing communication was also lacking as well. This goes with both the CSP and the Selectmen. We have had this conversation before; trying to get information out to the town has been challenging – we have sent emails and newsletters. We even had conversations about this not too long ago about trying to improve communication. We have this every year – especially around elections and referendums. It comes down to the fact we need better communication not just in this specific emergency situation; but in general. We usually send out information via email; the residents will have to sign up. This is a conversation we need to have.

First Selectwoman Wicewski noted that she and Selectman Blessington can agree on many things; but the one thing she will never agree on is that we cannot go overboard in public safety. We can never go too far and look at reasonable solutions. We need a solid plan – and have people come to the table. If that means having another committee and more conversations; that is what we should do. Let's put people with knowledge at the table with us and help us make the decisions. Lt. Palmer noted that they want to partner with the town to be a resource in those conversations regarding what they think is best for the town; no matter what system is put in place. He reiterated that they thought they got the word out in such a manner that they disseminated the info but clearly they did not. First Selectwoman Wicewski noted that she did not mean to advocate for a resident state trooper; she doesn't think a resident state trooper would fix every problem that we have; it is just an avenue that would be explored. She then said she doesn't think having a resident state trooper would have changed the situation. She is in favor of moving forward with the process quickly. The town would be able to participate in the process.

Selectman Blessington said what we are talking about here is a one-off of a one in a million occurrence that happened. The complaint is there is no way to communicate to the people. We can form a committee and this committee can meet and meet and study and hire a consultant and after a year and a half, they will come in and say we need to get Everbridge. This is not trying to communicate with people in town to tell them it is time to get out and vote or Willington day is coming; but this system is to inform the public of one very rare situation- something similar to what happened last Friday. He then added do we need a resident state trooper? We've had that argument before and sure we will have it again; noting that he doesn't think a resident trooper would have changed the outcome and it is not a solution to our problem. The solution to our problem is to get the word out to our residents when there is imminent danger.

First Selectwoman Wicewski said that the system we put in place could be utilized for different things. The one in a million situation he speaks of has happened; we have multiple families who have been affected by this and she doesn't suppose they would appreciate us to wait for the next one in a million situation to take place before we take action,. Selectman Blessington clarified that is not what he said. He said we should take action now because as far as he can see the only action we need is to get a reverse 911 system. You are saying we need to hold several meetings.

Selectwoman Boritz noted that she thinks we all agree that we need to put a reverse 911 system in place. It is the broader context what we are alluding to; it is the emergency; but the day to day notifications. She added that she thinks there could be a potential to having a resident state trooper. We have numerous complaints of nuisance and speeding on a regular basis – all of this is connected. She added this is a valid conversation to engage in going forward. She said she also believes looking at their ability to communicate outwards to the community at large is a valid conversation to have regardless of whether it is an emergency situation or critical issues. Yes to the reverse 911 happening ASAP and also yes to the broader conversation to assist our town to feel safer and having better communication.

First Selectwoman Wiczenski said there are lots of lessons to learn here and we need to move forward in a positive direction. She added that she appreciates all of the emailed comments sent in prior to the meeting. They did not anticipate all of the chats that were added during the meeting. Someone asked if the chats can be saved. This meeting will be uploaded to the Town's YouTube page.

First Selectwoman Wiczenski noted that someone started a private go fund me for the DeMers family. She thanked people for their generosity. If anyone is able to give and or share.

First Selectwoman Wiczenski thanked everyone for attending the meeting. She noted that the other victim of the tragic events has asked to remain anonymous but please keep them in your thoughts. Our Human Services Department is setting up services for anyone who wants or needs crisis counseling. Contact Human Services at 860-487-3118. E.O. Smith and both HMS and CES are also offering resources as well.

First Selectwoman Wiczenski stated that she wants to hear everyone's concerns – both positive and negative. We cannot know what you need if we don't know. We are here for everyone and anyone that wants to talk. This is not the only conversation we will have on this; but she felt compelled to meet right away.

Selectwoman Boritz then noted that there were several questions that were not answered in the chat session; and asked if they could be reviewed. First Selectwoman Wiczenski stated that she will be reviewing these questions with Lt. Palmer. Lt. Palmer noted that the concern of the response from the barracks to the residents is an immediate concern and will be the first thing he will review when he gets in tomorrow. First Selectwoman Wiczenski will get the info to him.

Lt. Palmer stated that he will be reviewing the questions and will try to answer as best as they can (denoting that some might not be able to because of the ongoing investigation) and also said rest assured that the town of Willington is as important to the personnel at troop C as anywhere else. The troopers take these things personally; whether it be a stolen quad or something as horrific as this. He said we want to bring them to justice. In this instance there was a piece that wasn't as robust as it should have been. The town of Willington is well protected by Troop C and they are committed to that.

First Selectwoman Wiczenski thanked everyone for joining the meeting and Lt. Palmer as well. She noted although her door is not open to the public; due to covid-19 but her email and phone is and welcomed everyone to reach out.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:12 PM

Respectfully Submitted,
Robin Campbell
Office Manager

