

FAQs PUBLIC PROTECTION COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS
DECEMBER 2009

What is the Public Protection Committee?

“to inventory and present a listing of the Town’s resources necessary to maintain the public safety of the citizens, assets and the resources of the Town of Mount Desert. Also identify public safety deficiencies and make recommendation for the remediation of said deficiencies.” Board of Selectman 9/28/2008

The Public Protection Committee was formed by the Board of Selectman in the fall of 2008. The Board asked the PPC to catalog the town’s effort for public protection and list things that are not working as they should. The PPC was then to recommend to the Board solutions to the identified problems. The PPC has the Town department heads as members (Fire Chief, Police Chief, Head of Public Works and Harbor Master) as well as 6 citizen members. The Ambulance Service, the Water District and other Town officials participate as needed.

What has the PPC done in the last year?

The PPC spent most of last year surveying the public protection services to find areas where services were not adequate or missing completely. The PPC looked at such things as adequacy of personnel, adequacy of buildings and adequacy of equipment. The committee used a process measuring problems and rating them one against the other to identify which problems needed attention first. The PPC found that the present police department facility was dangerous to the public, police and dispatchers. The lack of privacy and security prompted the PPC to put building a new Police Department facility as first priority. The PPC realized that the worsening problem with too few volunteer firemen was the second most important problem for solution. Even though all PPC members agreed that the Town Garage supporting the Public Works department was a serious problem, they felt that a new Town Garage could wait until the PD and FD problems had been fixed. All votes by the PPC to identify the problems, prioritize the problems, and recommend solutions have been unanimous.

What is the worst public protection problem identified?

The Police Department simply does not have enough space. Safety requires that police activities be separate from public traffic within the Town Hall. Safety requires that potentially violent or violent people be kept secure. Simply following the local news here in Maine explains how serious injury and death can occur very quickly by people who don't look dangerous.

Why is the Fire Department the key factor in future costs of public protection for the Town of Mt Desert?

Similar to other towns in the U.S., the Town of Mt. Desert has trouble providing adequate numbers of fire fighters with the proper training when needed. People have more demands on their time than before. The minimum training needed to safely fight fires requires many week- end hours taken from family time. The Town has been considering moving to a combination fire department that would include a core of 4 full time fire fighters and volunteers. A core of full time FFs is expensive. In addition the Town would have to provide facilities for the on duty FFs. If the Town could successfully maintain an all-volunteer FF force the Town would avoid the annual cost of full time FFs and the cost of building and maintaining a facility to meet their needs.

If the Town Garage is so bad, why is it not higher on the list for replacement?

The PPC recognizes the health and comfort hazards of the present building. At the same time the PPC decided that the risk to public safety and employee safety with the present situations with the PD and FD were more critical. The PPC does support a rebuilding of the Town Garage as soon as funding allows and after the other problems have been fixed.

Why should the Town spend more money when the economy is just now improving?

New construction on Mt Desert Island is comparatively expensive. However, with the present slow down of private work, there is more interest in public construction projects providing more competition to lower the cost of construction. Also the cost of building materials and the cost of money are at an unusual low.

If these problems have been known for years, why have they not been fixed?

Taxpayers appropriately do not want to pay one dollar more in taxes than they have to pay. Unfortunately, sometimes not spending money today dooms us to higher costs tomorrow. Not successfully recruiting and retaining an all-volunteer fire department is an example.

The problem with the police department facility has been long known but the increasing violence around us demands action.

How much new space does the Police Department need? The Fire Department? The Town Administration?

An adequate space for the PD requires 1400-1600 square feet plus a one vehicle secure space for the duty cruiser. Building out the ground floor to the present Town Hall to the limits of the FD garage provides adequate space. If we are successful in maintaining an all-volunteer FD then a Chief's office and equipment storage and maintenance space is all the additional space necessary. Adding a second story of approximately 1000 square feet over the new space for the PD is adequate for all known future needs of the Town administration.

Do we really need to build new space to solve these problems?

The PPC spent many hours cataloging all possible space that the Town might use. No existing buildings other than the Town Hall could be modified adequately. The PPC reviewed a redesign of the Town Hall Meeting Room to meet the PD needs. The proposed redesign would have been satisfactory for the PD but the loss of the meeting space that is used for different activities frequently, proved to be unacceptable to the Board of Selectmen. Also putting the PD in the meeting room space would not have solved any other identified needs.

Why should volunteers get paid anything?

Volunteer FFs are a bargain for the Town. When the obligation for training and responding was less and the numbers of volunteers was greater, the individual burden was tolerable. Today volunteer FFs are well trained professionals who spend considerable time helping protect the public safety.

Time that the rest of us spend with our families or even sleeping. We need to recognize that volunteer FFs are similar to part time employees who should be fairly paid for their time. They protect us and save us tax dollars all at the same time.

Why does a town of only 2000 people need so much? Can we afford it?

The Town of Mt Desert is a seasonal community that must have the infrastructure of a town of 8000. Our seasonal residents pay for almost three quarters of the cost of Town government. They have paid and continue to pay enough to expect adequate town services. There is some inefficiency in town services when we have to provide for 8000 folks when we have far fewer most of the year. Fortunately, those who are with us seasonally more than pay their share. The tax rate (mil rate) in the Town of Mt Desert is comparatively low and these recommendations will allow the mil rate to remain comparatively low.