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Earlier today, an agreement we've been working on with our neighbors in St. Albans City since July 2022 was made public for the first time. In our minds, the Agreement for Policing, Water, and Wastewater Services is a breakthrough. It'll provide our community with dependable law enforcement services at a reasonable cost, and it effectively puts our longstanding dispute over water and sewer services with our sister municipality to bed.

Due to the scarcity of police officers in the labor market, we believe that it's no longer in the best interest of the Town to be on a 3-5 year contractual cycle for law enforcement services. What was once an effort to chase the best possible law enforcement service for the lowest possible price is now too much of a gamble. The labor market for officers has drastically changed in the last few years, which makes it exceedingly hard for agencies to scale their operations up to take on our growing coverage needs. We need a longer-term solution. Our options are simple - enter into a longer-term agreement with a qualified local law enforcement agency, or create our own.

Creating our own agency would prove to be significantly more expensive than partnering with an existing one for the long haul. The only benefits of going alone would be having control over the budget development process, leadership recruitment, and policies of the department. We believe that the proposed agreement works well to address these needs, as it provides us a seat at the table with our neighbors in the City where these decisions will be made. We feel that it adequately provides us with opportunities to be true stakeholders in the Department.

In addition to the longer term used in this agreement, there are other significant differences that should be highlighted. The agreement establishes a Joint Police Board that will include equal representation from the City of St. Albans and the Town of St. Albans. The JPB will make decisions regarding finances and annual budgets relating to the police department. Both the Town and City will also have equal representation on the updated joint Police Advisory Board. As well, the Town of St. Albans will participate in the future selection of a St. Albans Police Chief. Any future Federal and/or State grants relating to policing will be shared equally between the municipalities. These important elements of the agreement place the City and the Town on the same side of the table. Our future successes and challenges regarding public safety will be faced together

Policing aside, the agreement also addresses our need for dependable and fair access to water and wastewater services. Our dispute with the City over the terms under which they provide service to Town ratepayers goes back generations and has held us back. It's cost us economic opportunities and growth that we can't even quantify, and hampers our ability to compete for new business development opportunities. St. Albans can't compete with other towns or regions if we continue to compete with ourselves - that much is certain. And we can't maintain a lower tax rate without new growth. Water and sewer access is critical to our community's economic vitality, and this agreement provides that access at a fair cost and on a level playing field.

We ask that folks not harp on the past, and that the discussion around this agreement instead be focused on the future. Think of what our community would look like today if these issues were dealt with 50 years ago and apply that thinking to what our community will look like 50 years from now with this agreement in place.

At the end of the day, water and sewer is not about pipelines and pumps. It's not about dollars and cents. It's about people, and it's about creating economic opportunities for people. Every new or existing business we can convince to locate or expand here means there's more of a chance for our young people to be able to live and work here, instead of having to move to find opportunities elsewhere. And it means that folks who want to relocate to our community will have a real chance to thrive here.

Please don't hesitate to email, text, or call us with questions about the intricacies of this agreement. We're here to answer your questions, and would appreciate the opportunity to listen to your thoughts.

Respectfully submitted by all 5 members of the Selectboard for the Town of St. Albans.