



Public Safety & Transportation Committee Report

City of Newton **In City Council**

Wednesday, February 4, 2026

Present: Councilors Lucas (Chair), Greenberg, Wright, Block, Irish, Roche, Golden and Silber

Also Present: Councilors Krintzman, Farrell, Oliver, Bixby, Charm, Baker and Malakie

City Staff: Superintendent Dennis Dowling, Newton Police Department; Josh Morse, Chief Operating Officer; Dana Hanson, Chief of Staff and Ellen Ishkanian, Director Community Communications

Others Present: Chief Timothy Cohoon, State Representative Amy Mah Sangiolo and Julie Cohen, Fig City News

All agendas and reports, both past and present, can be found at the following link:
<https://www.newtonma.gov/government/city-clerk/city-council/council-standing-committees/public-safety-transportation-committee>

For more information regarding this meeting, a video recording can be found at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcLYI3-ugMQ>

#63-26 Appointment of Timothy V. Cohoon as Chief of Newton Police Department

HIS HONOR THE MAYOR appointing Timothy V. Cohoon as Chief of Newton Police Department. (30 days: 03/04/2026)

Action: **Public Safety & Transportation Approved 6-0-1, Councilor Roche abstaining, Councilor Wright not voting**

Note: Chief Cohoon joined the Committee for discussion on his appointment as the new Newton Police Chief.

Chief Cohoon stated that he grew up in the Braintree, MA. When he returned from college, he was hired by the Sheriff's Department where he spent a short time before being appointed to the Braintree Police Department where he has spent his last 30 years.

Chief Cohoon has worked in special operations, K-9, investigative, detectives, and narcotics. In 2006, he was promoted to Sergeant. In 2016, he was promoted to Lieutenant, where he began focusing on executive leadership when he realized the impact of culture and why we need to have certain things in place. Over the next 7-10 years, Braintree had a culture change in the city and the department, that was impactful. Chief Cohoon had an opportunity to watch from the

sidelines with 2-3 chiefs working in different manners to see what worked and what didn't, that is when he became very interested in leadership. Chief Cohoon was then promoted to Deputy Chief joining the executive leadership team where many things happened in a short period of time including critical incidents, shootings, officer-involved shootings, people getting hit, a canine killed, murders and multi-casualty events that stressed not only the department and the city but the small executive leadership team. Over time, Chief Cohoon was proud to see the department respond to some of the challenges. In closing, Chief Cohoon stated that it has been a truly valuable experience, and something that he'll take with him.

Committee members and Councilors comments, questions and answers:

I was pleased to read in the Mayor's letter that "Chief Cohoon believes being an effective leader requires vision, high standards, and a strong team. Importantly, he knows that community trust is essential, and that police departments, stakeholders, and residents co-produce public safety". Please know that Newton agrees, and holds our officers in high regard. We look forward to working with you in a collaborative, transparent, and productive way.

The city adopted the Welcoming City Ordinance in 2017. Recently, Governor Healey signed an executive order placing limitations on ICE activity statewide. What is your understanding of Newton's Welcoming City Ordinance and how do you see your role in ensuring that it's implemented consistently in a way that maintains community trust? Chief Cohoon answered that this is one of the most complex issues and it's evolving. He stated that he wished he could turn to best practices around the country but there are none. We do not identify folks, do not investigate, arrest or detain. Immigration status plays no role in enforcement as far as the Newton Police Department. Chief Cohoon stated that it is his understanding that we cannot use city resources in any civil immigration, and that's healthy. We want folks who need services not to be afraid to access services. We may run into problems because it is evolving and creating an expectation that the Newton Police are authorized to stop federal immigration enforcement or operations, but we are not authorized. We're not authorized to assess and determine the lawfulness of ICE operations, their mission or validity. I don't want an officer in an unfair position of entering into a rapidly evolving situation to make a call that may or may not be correct. If an officer is wrong, they run the risk of being charged federally for interfering or obstructing federal operations. If there was something extraordinarily evident that shouldn't be happening, I would expect officers to do their best to intervene. The duty to intervene is fact-specific, narrowly defined and requires three things. First, the officer needs to either personally witness or have reason to know. Second, they have to see what excessive force is. Third, they have to have a realistic opportunity to intervene. There are very strict legal principles involved that are complex. I don't want to create an expectation from the public that Newton Police are going to stop federal operations, they're not empowered to do so.

Many residents are experiencing levels of fear and uncertainty as they watch federal enforcement actions unfold across the country. Concerns about the use of unlawful, excessive, and lethal force, violations of civil rights, and the detainment of innocent people. In response to these concerns, chiefs in Minneapolis, St. Paul, Denver and Needham, MA have stated that their

officers have a duty to intervene when witnessing excessive force as required under MGL, Chapter 6E, Section 50. Chief O'Hara of Minneapolis has said that officers could face discipline including termination for failing to act. Residents who live, work, or attend school in Newton simply want clarity and reassurance. Can residents call 911 if they experience unlawful force by federal enforcement agencies and expect Newton officers to intervene and would officers be protected? Would you be willing to make a public statement affirming that residents can expect help from the Newton Police Department in these situations? Chief Cohoon answered yes, they can expect help from the police but with some caveats. This is not an easy issue. The Massachusetts Chiefs of Police Association and chiefs have been collaborating over the last few days to come up with some responses, guidelines and best practices. It is necessary to be an understanding that there are structural separations between the federal, municipal and local jurisdictions. We do not participate in civil immigration enforcement by law, our job is public safety and to keep the peace.

One of the biggest challenges identified is department vacancies and the challenge of recruiting. What can we do to make Newton an attractive place to work? Chief Cohoon answered that historically in Massachusetts, we didn't have a problem with attracting officers. In 2006, there were 30,000+, In 2016, 16,000 and in 2023, 3,600 who took the test, including the State Police. We knew we had a recruitment and retention issue. We're trying to modernize the job market. Today, potential applicants check websites, social media, etc. there needs to be an easier process to get officers in the pipeline. Civil Service has been noticeably very difficult to navigate. In the department we can improve organizational culture. Today, the workforce is very transient, that never used to be. Officers leave if the culture isn't right. It is necessary to have career development opportunities, equipment to do their job, and training to ensure their work-life balance and their offset wellness. You have to ensure that you have respectful and transparent leadership with internal procedural justice. Procedural justice is huge in the community. Procedural justice ensures that you're treating people with dignity and respect. In police encounters, neutral and transparent decision-making, and conveying trustworthy motives are necessary. Officers who feel respected, have a voice will treat people better. It is my understanding that Newton does not necessarily have an organizational culture problem. Civil Service came up with an alternative hiring process allowing communities to hire 50% from their own process and 50% from the Civil Service. The ones hired on the alternative process become Civil Service qualified after review. At the end of 5 years, you're supposed to have a 50-50 ratio.

How would you describe your policing philosophy? What makes that philosophy effective, and what are some of the drawbacks? Chief Cohoon answered that you cannot do this job without the consent of the people that you are policing for. Legitimacy and public trust is paramount, being earned by the way you conduct yourself on the street. Public safety and policing are the strongest when officers feel valued, well-trained and supported. Public safety needs to be co-produced. We can't do it without the community. In general, community-focused policing is my philosophy. The executive leadership wants to see problems solved. We must find a way to reward the behavior we want to see each day.

Perhaps Newton doesn't face the same public safety concerns that other communities have. What are the top 3-5 public safety issues for residents, visitors and people working in the city? What does the police do to improve these outcomes? Chief Cohoon answered that Newton is very safe based on its demographic which the police play an enormous role in. The department is very engaged in the community with a philosophy to address issues prior to them becoming a problem. One of the biggest threats facing law enforcement in every community, is how we deal with people with a diminished capacity and how officers approach the situation.

What can we do in Newton to make traffic safer for motorists, pedestrians and cyclists? Chief Cohoon answered that he thinks it's got to be a multi-pronged approach. It's not just enforcement. There has to be officers in a robust traffic unit dedicating resources to problem areas.

Will you dedicate resources to ensure officers are available for the kind of multi-functional group that is taking traffic engineering, traffic advocacy and Traffic Bureau? Chief Cohoon answered that he thinks it should be a priority, but cannot make a promise.

How do we make officers feel like they belong in Newton? Chief Cohoon answered that this is currently the most heavily scrutinized industry in the world. Psychological safety is necessary for officers. Policing is one of the only industries in the high-stakes industry where they cannot be wrong. If you have folks that don't feel psychologically safe to do their job, and afraid of making mistakes, ironically, they make more mistakes.

When I've asked officers, what's their biggest challenge is, I consistently hear mental health issues. How would you assess Newton's ability to respond to a mental health crisis call? What would you see as strengthening tools, is it partnerships, training or staffing? Chief Cohoon answered that it is all. He would assess how we are doing with results. We've found a significant drop in use of force in some situations. Newton officers are better equipped with de-escalation measures and alternative methods. It is necessary for 80% of officers to take a 16-hour course and 20% to have Crisis Intervention Training (CIT), all covered by grants.

Officers enforce noise, leaf blower, light trespassing ordinances, etc., during off hours. A former officer works in the Inspectional Services Department. What is your philosophy on how these ordinances will be enforced? Chief Cohoon answered that if it is part of their repertoire, he would expect them to fulfill the mission.

What is your understanding on the intervention if there were federal agents coming on private property, public property, or municipal property including businesses. What are people's rights and what would be appropriate? Chief Cohoon answered that first and foremost, we would want people to call, because this could be a home invasion. It may not be the federal authorities. Hopefully, we would have a heads up, but they're not obligated. If this is a valid federal warrant or a criminal offense, the last thing we want to do is interfere for reasons including the safety of the resident and the safety of officers. We would help, perhaps help them understand what's

happening. I don't want officers and the public in a situation where they believe that the officers are not fulfilling their obligation, which they can't for a variety of reasons. Every community is trying to build trust and legitimacy. Hopefully, relationships can improve. A task force including federal, local and state authorities, municipal leaders and chiefs will work together to find best practices for specific instances. Regarding city property, Chief Cohoon answered that he doesn't know how it looks in reality.

Do you support facial and vehicle recognition software? Chief Cohoon answered that he doesn't have a lot of exposure on facial recognition. Regarding license plate readers, Chief Cohoon answered that he is a proponent of it because there has been success on horrific crimes, where it has helped the police. We've had numerous wins, but it has to come with safeguards. The safeguards built into the company that Braintree uses has built in privacy dashboards for the community to review. Data is held for 30 days. However, search data is retained and open as public record. The system is very robust, and there are privacy concerns. It is necessary for public safety to be balanced.

Do you support traffic safety cameras, and if so, do you support their use in Newton? Chief Cohoon answered that he doesn't know enough about traffic safety cameras. If it would enhance the safety of residents, then he'd be open to looking into it.

Should the department assist residents in clarifying between administrative and additional warrants? Chief Cohoon answered that it could be explained, but not sure on the number of leads they would receive. A civilized detainer is not a federal warrant; it's a federal administrative warrant.

If the executive leadership learns that ICE is staging a Newton parking lot for roaming or civil immigration what would the department do? Chief Cohoon answered that it would be a violation of the Welcoming City Ordinance.

Regarding witnesses, protesters, and the potential for conflict. Should the police be prepared to be witnesses in a criminal or administrative proceeding? Chief Cohoon answered that if they're present and witness an event, I would expect them to document the occurrence.

Without further discussion, Councilor Block made a motion to approve the appointment of Timothy V. Cohoon, as the new Newton Police Chief. Committee members agreed 6-0-1, Councilor Roche abstaining and Councilor Wright not voting.

The committee adjourned at 8:22 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Tarik Lucas, Chair