

Watch Now: Amherst town police announces officer of the year award recipient

Justin Faulconer

Jan 19, 2022



Officer Caleb Martin, right, speaks after receiving the Amherst Town Police 2021 Officer of the Year Award during Amherst Town Council's Jan. 12 meeting. At center is Bobby Shiflett, the town's police chief.

Justin Faulconer

Town of Amherst officer Caleb Martin was honored with the department's 2021 Officer of the Year award during Amherst Town Council's Jan. 12 meeting.

Chief Bobby Shiflett said he's seen Martin "do things over the top" in serving the community and interacting with the public. Shiflett said Martin has told him in performing those actions: "I just treat people the way I want to be treated."

"That goes a long way," Shiflett said.

The town police department's Facebook page said department staff voted on this year's award. Martin "exceeded duty requirements that are expected of this position and has on multiple occasions demonstrated a distinct pattern of community service coupled with professional achievement," the Facebook post said.

The small department of fewer than 10 full-time officers, including Shiflett, gathered in the council chambers to celebrate the moment.

"I could name every officer in this room," Shiflett said of the Officer of the Year distinction. "I take the award very seriously. It's something that's earned."

Martin was given a standing ovation as he accepted the award. "I've never worked with a better group of guys," Martin said of the department.

Officer Brandon Payne also was given the 2021 Award of Excellence during the meeting and Ali Davis, assistant accreditation manager, also was recognized for her dedication and work toward the department becoming a state accreditation agency last year. The department is the smallest agency in Virginia to become professionally accredited, according to town officials.

“This was a monumental task that was achieved when we were told it wouldn’t happen,” Shiflett said. “The team effort was absolutely superb.”

Accreditation status acknowledges execution of thorough detailed written directives, policies, procedures and training, according to Shiflett.

Shiflett said his officers have done much in a stressful year that often has brought short-staffed situations during the pandemic.

“It’s been a remarkable year,” Shiflett said. “I can’t say enough.”

Shiflett also presented the department’s first annual report of the police force’s activities last year to council and town citizens. The report, which is available on the town’s website in documents related to the meeting, outlines training officers went through, a description of resources and statistics.

In 2021 the department received 78 news items of evidence and property and maintained a chain of custody on them, uploaded more than 900 body camera and dash camera videos onto the department server, patrolled about 55,750 miles and added two reserve officers, bringing that total to four, according to the report.

The department also helped organize the annual Christmas toy drive that collected more than 400 toys and donations that exceeded \$1,600 with a raffle raising more than \$4,000.

Vice Mayor Rachel Carton complimented Shiflett on bringing the report forward.

“The quality of this, you all have blown my socks off,” Carton said. “I like to see it in a nutshell.”

Council also thanked the officers for their work in a stressed environment.

“I can’t be any prouder of our exceptional staff, across the board,” councilor Ken Watts said. “Everybody just steps up and goes above and beyond and I appreciate it.”

Amherst Fire Department fighting a new hazard - inflation

Justin Faulconer

Jul 27, 2022



Amherst Fire Department members look over a new engine on July 16, 2020.

Justin Faulconer

Inflation has driven up the price tag on a new tanker truck for the Amherst Fire Department by 19%, an addition of just more than \$160,000 that county officials have agreed to cover in a purchase now at more than \$1 million.

The fire truck purchase was listed at \$871,615 in the county's current budget as part of its capital improvement plan. Sam Bryant, director of public safety, recently told the Amherst County Board of Supervisors at least three price increases from the vendor have come about.

Bryant said the new truck should last at least 20 years and the overall price tag going to such a high level is new territory for the county.

Supervisor Tom Martin, who volunteers as chief of the department, recused himself from the vote and left the meeting room during the discussion. The board approved the increase 3-0, with Supervisor Claudia Tucker absent.

“We can’t control inflation,” David Pugh, the board’s chair, said. “We don’t know what’s going to happen. ... Everybody is having a tough time with inflation, especially if you drive a lot.”

Bryant said the Emergency Services Council deeply wrestled with the request for more money.

“We worked hard,” Bryant said. “These are taxpayer dollars and this was very difficult.”

The board and staff also discussed a less expensive purchase option, specifics of equipment features and water capacity. Going with a cheaper option would reduce water capacity by 500 gallons, according to the dialogue.

Supervisor Jimmy Ayers said the 19% hike was “by no means anticipated” and he’s had the unpleasant experience of being in rural parts of the county fighting fires without enough water.

“...And it’s a heck of a feeling when your engine runs out of water and then the house fire or whatever you’re fighting, the flames pick up and you’re screaming for help in addition to water,” Ayers said.

He said 500 gallons could make the difference between life and death of a county resident or someone losing a home.

Pugh said he doesn’t want to be the person to be responsible for a truck not having the proper water capacity at a crucial time.

“I just want to make sure we are making a financially smart decision,” Pugh said.

Pugh said he would be hard pressed to find another locality of Amherst County’s size that has made as much investment in emergency vehicles.

“This board and previous boards have done a heck of a job putting new trucks on the road. We spend a lot of money on fire apparatus equipment in the county,” Pugh said, adding of the price hike: “It’s a hard pill to swallow. I know we can’t control inflation, but at this time we’ve got to make prudent financial decisions.”

When discussing specifics of the apparatus options and spending less money on the purchase, Bryant said: “I can’t put a price tag on a life. This is a hard one.”

Pugh said he appreciates the volunteers who save the county millions annually in what staff would be paid to fight fires. Moving forward, he said, the board needs to take a hard look at what the county is buying in emergency apparatus.

“They can’t combat the inflation,” Ayers said of local fire departments. “No one can.”

AMHERST

Amherst town police adding first four-legged member

Justin Faulconer

Aug 17, 2022



Skye is on track to becoming the Town of Amherst Police Department's first K-9.
Justin Faulconer

The Town of Amherst Police Department is working to add a special new member to its ranks: a Blue Heeler/German Shepherd mix named Skye.

The police dog would be a new feature for the small department, and Amherst Town Council on Aug. 10 unanimously approved funding to pursue training Skye.

The dog would have a threefold purpose, according to Officer Luther Rose: detecting illegal drugs, specifically methamphetamine, cocaine and heroin; tracking in cases of missing persons; and helping clear buildings during searches with potential suspects inside.

The cost for the program is about \$12,500 in the first year and \$8,000 each year thereafter, according to town officials.

The dog was scheduled to begin a six-week training school Aug. 15 and is expected to start being used next month, according to Rose.

Councilor Janice Wheaton said she is glad the dog can be used in tracking people in rescue missions.

Chief Bobby Shiflett agreed the tracking factor is needed.

“Time is of the essence when you’re looking for somebody,” Shiflett said.

The town has several open complaints from citizens on drug houses in Amherst with no way to effectively police those issues, according to a report to council on bringing in a police dog. An effective tool is consent to search, which can simply be denied by a person suspected of illegal drug activity, and stopping vehicles seen coming and going from a house consistent with drug activity is a best practice, the report states.

A police K-9 would be able to gain probable cause based on odor detection because of its keen sense of smell, according to town police. A majority of all narcotics and criminal enterprise investigations either started due to items found in a search of a vehicle on a traffic stop or numerous traffic stops with searches, the report states.

The town department having its own dog and not having to rely on the Amherst County Sheriff’s Office or another locality would drastically cut down the response time during searches.

In addition to tracking those lost, the police dog could be used in foot pursuits of criminals and escaped prisoners. The report notes an incident where prisoners escaped in town and had residents in a panic as authorities searched for them. In that situation, a county K-9 was unavailable and a town dog could have been used to apprehend those escapees much quicker, according to town police.

Rose owns Skye and is willing to donate her to the police department as its first choice, the report states.

“I think the dog will be beneficial,” Shiflett said. “Even if it saves one life or finds one person, it’s done its job. And the only pay is going to be good food and play time.”