

Selectmen to talk gun rights at next meeting

By Daymond Steer

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TAMWORTH — Selectmen promise they really will address complaints about gun restrictions in the town's personnel policy at their next meeting. The controversy has been simmering since the summer.

"This issue has dragged on and on," said Selectman John Roberts. "I'm ready to put it behind us."

Since August, fire officials and some residents have maintained that the town is breaking state law with a policy that says town employees cannot carry guns at work without written permission from the selectmen. During the selectmen's meeting on Nov. 5, selectmen scheduled the issue for their Nov. 19 meeting.

However, at the Nov. 19 meeting, Chairman Tom Abugelis and Roberts chose to postpone the discussion until Dec. 3 because they didn't have a full board. Selectman Willie Farnum was away attending a conference.

"I wouldn't have put it on the agenda if I realized Willie would be out," said Abugelis.

When the issue was first brought up in August, Abugelis was out dealing with a serious medical issue and Roberts and Farnum said they would delay any decisions until Abugelis's return, which happened in October.

Farnum and Roberts said the town needed the policy to protect itself from liability. They suggested fire fighters responding to an emergency could keep their guns in their personal vehicles.

But Assistant Fire Chief Jim Bowles and his father Fire Ward David Bowles weren't satisfied. They argued the town was violating RSA 159:26, which prohibits towns from regulating firearms. Bowles said fire fighters don't need guns to do their jobs. Rather, they just want to protect their rights.

Abugelis said he's spent the last few months getting up to speed and described the issue as "complex." Abugelis said his research includes information from Police Chief Dan Poirier, Pro Gun New Hampshire, a letter from Town Attorney Rick Sager, and the town's personnel policy. Abugelis said he was close to making a decision but declined to explain what it will be.

"I will advocate for some type of change," he said.

Bowles said it would be helpful if they made Sager's letter public.

However, selectmen declined. Roberts explained it's customary to keep communications with the town's attorney nonpublic.