

9.25.2020

Dear Pine Plains,

This was, once again, a week dedicated to work on the budget and the statewide mandate for Police Reform. Officer in Charge John Hughes has been pulling all records of arrests dating back 5 years, while I have been pulling together a diverse Stakeholders Committee to examine our policies and generally lend voices from their perspectives as citizens with expertise in social work, mental illness, racial issues, and policing. In the process of participating in the Reform, it has been fascinating to learn how unusual it is for such a small town as Pine Plains to have its own Police Department. What that has given us is a group of people whose knowledge base is the people who live here, not just laws. We have two other agencies tasked with policing Pine Plains, the State Troopers and the Sheriff's Department. The Town has no say over their behavior, but our own Department is a great resource for the other agencies as regards the people they are dealing with. The hope is that the project of Reform brings together all agencies under a unified policy, with the training to fulfill its demands.

One of the offshoots of this work has been the opportunity to sit down with John and get his philosophy on leading our Department. A lot of thought goes into this on his part. His priority is the people here, and on not creating bitterness in citizens of the community, but a strong sense of empathy and fairness. The law is the law and has to be followed, but beyond that, there is no reason for officers to behave with anything but respect for everyone. That extends to his own officers, who value his flexibility with their hours and his mentorship at all times. He believes in mentoring, and is always available for communication during officers' shifts. He has his officers available to the public for their needs any time: parades, events, crises. These points may seem small, but they make a big difference. In all the years that John has served as Officer in Charge in Pine Plains, the department has only had one "use of force", which ended without any injury.

But the Covid-19 virus has presented new challenges here. The stress under which people are living has increased exponentially, driven by the fear of getting sick but also by all of the disparate media coverage and the politicalization of the crisis. This has led to an increase in domestic abuse, suicidal threats, incidents driven by mental illness, and opioid use, which was actually beginning to dissipate here before the virus struck. I think we are all probably aware of all of this, but it is worth mentioning here because it is important, I also think, for the Town to know itself. We are not an eden

to escape to, we are a microcosm of what is happening in the rest of the country. We can study Pine Plains and understand the nation. This is the gift of being small.

This rift has resulted in an attitude of unwillingness to fill out the 2020 Census. But the Census is mandated in the Constitution, and as such, it is the law that we must fill it out. In addition to that, an accurate Census count is essential for the town to receive state and federal aid. Counting our numbers is how aid is determined.

The Library folks are working on this year's Cemetery Tours, and right now trying to determine whether they might be able to go LIVE or have to resort to a virtual tour. Stay tuned on that. Last year's was just wonderful, and I know the committee is working on new voices to bring to the performance. You can access Library events on Facebook on their page at Pine Plains Free Library, as well as their website. www.pineplainslibrary.org

Our Library is the center of our culture here, recently joined by The Stissing Center, which is where this year we are moving our polling place. Don't come out to Town Hall to vote—you will be able to go to The Stissing Center and cast your votes there, right in the middle of town. Although this is the result of the pandemic, I am excited for the opportunity to make so accessible such a vital core of democracy as our right to vote. With our normal polling place so far from town, those without cars are at a distinct disadvantage. This year will be different.

The last veggies were yanked quickly out of the Community Garden right after the early frost, the trees are beginning to turn, the corn and hay have been cut in the fields, and Pine Plains is welcoming new people to nestle in under the mountain.

Stay colorful, Pine Plains!

Darrah Cloud