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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Ellen! I'm so glad to see you back here. Hope you're doing well.

I want to be really careful about the Rake stuff. They tried to get The Commons to co-publish the piece and I didn't do so. (I have thoughts after having talked to Norma at the time — I think they missed a bigger story there.)

—J



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Brattleboro chief retires, having made her mark on police
2 dept.

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

3 As she steps down after nearly five years, Police Chief
4 Norma Hardy reflects on leading the department through an
5 understaffed and turbulent time

####END SUBHED####

6 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

7 As Norma Hardy sits down to talk about her four and
8 half-year tenure at the Brattleboro Police Department, it's clear
9 what's top of mind for her.

10 The departing police chief points to a 2-inch-thick stack
11 of paper — printouts of department emails and texts — that she
12 will provide for a public records request from someone in
13 Massachusetts.

14 "I don't know what they're going to do with it. They're
15 probably going to try to use it for the same purposes," she says,
16 referring to a records request in 2025 that resulted in coverage in
17 the alternative news site, The Rake Vermont.

18 The post generally portrayed the department of being too
19 close to a controversial social media personality known as
20 "Planet Hank." It also specifically accused her of deliberately
21 redacting an email.

22 Hardy believes her efforts to be transparent and
23 accessible backfired and that she was unfairly accused.

24 "They took only certain texts and put them in the article,
25 making it seem like he [Poitras] had this unholy access to me,"
26 she says. "I gave everybody access to me. My reputation has been
27 untarnished for 34 years."

28 While an internal town review of the accusations against
29 Hardy revealed only an "unintentional error" in addressing the
30 public records request, the controversy — and a series of public
31 records requests that followed — have taken a toll on her and her
32 family.

33 "All of this was started out of hating of Hank, and I'm
34 collateral damage," she says. "I'm just tired."

35 **From low morale to 'a** 36 **destination for officers'**

37 A very different picture of Chief Hardy is painted by a
38 number of people who worked with her, were policed by her
39 department, and interacted with her every day.

40 “She’s been a fantastic leader for the department during
41 the time she’s been here,” says Jeremy Evans, currently assistant
42 police chief and soon to be Hardy’s successor. “She literally was
43 the person we needed at the time.”

44 “We were in such a poor position, just like everywhere
45 else in the country, probably, but definitely in the state, with low
46 morale and with staffing levels,” Evans recalls. “We were at, like,
47 50% staffing.”

48 Hardy came to Brattleboro in 2021 after a long career
49 with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, with
50 experience both in big-city facilities and smaller New Jersey
51 towns.

52 She arrived at a moment of deep strain around the
53 country between police and community members after the
54 murder of George Floyd, a Black man, in Minneapolis by a white
55 police officer in 2020.

56 Nationally, protests over police violence were ongoing.
57 Locally, Brattleboro was still grappling with questions about
58 racial bias in traffic stops and with residents’ stories of negative
59 encounters with police.

60 It was also the tail end of the COVID-19 pandemic,
61 when departments across the country struggled to hang onto
62 officers, let alone recruit new ones.

63 Adam Petlock, a longtime member of the department
64 who rose through the ranks and will now serve as assistant chief,
65 remembers that context clearly.

66 “She came during a difficult time where you had all the
67 anti-police rhetoric that was going on,” he says. “It was hard to
68 retain employees.”

69 From the moment Hardy first came to the department as
70 a finalist candidate, Evans says, the department sensed something
71 different.

72 “There were multiple candidates,” he says. “When she
73 came through and met people, it was like an instantaneous

74 [connection]. We were all hoping that she would be the one who
75 got hired.”

76 For officers, the first signs of change were in how she
77 treated her own people.

78 Asked about a typical day at the office under Hardy,
79 Petlock says: “She’s always amongst the people. She’s not just in
80 her office typing. She does that stuff, but she’s also out talking to
81 the officers, always asking them how they’re doing, how their
82 families are.”

83 He remembers one officer who was clearly shaken after
84 having to use a Taser on a call.

85 After the incident, Hardy sat in the cruiser with the
86 officer for a while, “just talking to them, asking them how they’re
87 doing and making sure that they had access to resources and
88 social workers,” Petlock says. “It’s stuff like that that she notices
89 that not all leaders would.”

90 Evans says her “ability to engage with anyone” has been
91 central.

92 “She truly has a gift,” he says. “That’s a really hard ask, to
93 come into a police department and connect with everyone.”

94 Under Hardy, the department went from barely half-
95 staffed to a full staff of 30, in an era when police departments as
96 large as Burlington’s have struggled to fill their ranks.

97 Evans and Petlock credit this staffing success to the
98 culture Hardy created.

99 “We kind of created an environment where Brattleboro is
100 starting to become a destination for officers again, because of her
101 leadership,” Petlock says. “People want to come to a place where
102 there’s like a family environment, where you’re treated well, from
103 the leadership down.”

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‘The little things’ and human-scale policing

If internal reforms reshaped the department’s culture, Hardy’s innovation that’s most visible to the public might be the creation of the BRAT (Brattleboro Resource Assistance Team) program — a downtown-focused unit that blends law enforcement with social services.

Hardy says the idea grew out of a period of relentless downtown burglaries, break-ins, and fights. Short-staffed officers were constantly pulled from serious calls around town to take reports or respond to disturbances that weren’t life-threatening.

“We were having all the stores getting broken into, money taken, cash registers taken,” Hardy recalls. “We were responding to those calls constantly.”

Her solution: a dedicated, unarmed downtown team to maintain a visible presence, respond quickly to businesses, and handle many of those calls, freeing high-level officers to focus on higher-risk incidents across Brattleboro.

Hardy speaks of public safety rather than policing and emphasizes human contact and trust-building. She and her officers visit schools, eat lunch with first-graders, read at story time, and greet parents at drop-off. She encourages officers to walk people to their cars if they feel unsafe and to be recognizable, approachable faces in neighborhoods.

“Giving somebody a walk to their car shouldn’t be something that you need to be taught,” she says. “It should just be a human interaction that you would have with someone who doesn’t feel safe.”

“I think the police are much more community-oriented than they were when we first moved here,” says Maya Hasegawa, a 12-year Brattleboro resident. “You can worry about crime and all that, but it’s some of the little things [that police do], when people feel harassed on the street or whatever, that make a difference to a town.”

138 For Jane Wheeler, a Brattleboro resident who grew up in
139 town, the difference is clear.

140 She remembers Selectboard meetings where downtown
141 business owners and nonprofits like the Boys & Girls Club and
142 the New England Youth Theatre repeatedly asked for help with
143 public disorder downtown.

144 “The only thing that made a difference was when Chief
145 Hardy and the crew got involved, made the downtown action
146 plan, created the BRAT team, and things improved,” Wheeler
147 says.

148 **Blending deep compassion** 149 **with stronger accountability**

150 “When Chief Hardy first came to Brattleboro, I was
151 struck by her immediate understanding of the challenges
152 Brattleboro was facing,” writes Elizabeth Bridgewater, executive
153 director of the Windham & Windsor Housing Trust, which owns
154 and manages affordable housing properties in southern Vermont,
155 in an email to *The Commons*.

156 “As her vision unfolded, it was exciting to see that it
157 included a blend of deep compassion for those struggling and a
158 stronger framework of accountability for those engaged in
159 criminal activity,” she continues.

160 Bridgewater says Hardy “strengthened partnerships that
161 expanded the number of clinical social workers embedded
162 within the police department and hired people with lived
163 experience to work hand in hand with officers to help people
164 access treatment options.”

165 On Housing Trust properties, police officers and BRAT
166 members walk properties with staff, brainstorming how to
167 increase safety, and they routinely attend tenant meetings.

168 “Chief Hardy made herself and other leaders within the
169 department available to the community in refreshing ways,”
170 Bridgewater says. “One member of the BRAT team is now

171 stopping by a regularly scheduled game night at one downtown
172 property to continue strengthening those relationships. Residents
173 have responded positively to this.”

174 For Peter “Fish” Case, a Brattleboro Selectboard member
175 and owner of Burrows Sports downtown, BRAT has been
176 especially important in how the town responds to visible mental-
177 health crises.

178 “We have a long way to go, but we also have help that is
179 constantly on the street,” he says. “Mental illness is not illegal,
180 right? And if somebody is in distress and doesn’t know how to get
181 help, we now have the BRAT team who can help them get the
182 resources that they need.”

183 The model has drawn attention from beyond Brattleboro.

184 “Other communities have called wanting to talk to Chief
185 Hardy about how to implement that sort of thing,” Case says.
186 BRAT has been received widely and positively, and that’s all [her]
187 doing.”

188 At the same time, Wheeler worries that the very
189 programs residents now praise could be endangered by budget
190 pressures and political debates.

191 “Some on the Selectboard want to whittle away at the
192 police department overall,” she says. “I’m not sure where cuts
193 would be made, but they need to leave it [BRAT] alone, because
194 that’s what’s working.”

195 **What comes next?**

196 As Hardy prepares to leave, Evans says the department
197 aims to build on her approach while acknowledging the financial
198 pressures facing the town.

199 “We want to keep doing what we’re doing and do it
200 better — more effectively, more efficiently — to make all the
201 work we’re doing in public safety as good and useful as
202 possible,” he says.

203 For Petlock, the answer lies in carrying forward the spirit
204 of Hardy’s leadership.

205 He says he wants to emulate “the concern and caring
206 that she has — not just for the department, but for the
207 community.”

208 “It tells you that she really does care about what she’s
209 doing. It’s not just a job,” he says.

210 “We will feel her loss,” Case says. “Although I have the
211 utmost confidence in the incoming chief, [...] the impact that
212 Chief Hardy has had on this community has really just been
213 impressive.”

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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LINKS:

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VIDEO:

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LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

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