Establishment of a Community Safety Ad Hoc Committee

Purpose

This proposal recommends that the Bethel Select Board establish a Community Safety Ad Hoc Committee (the "Committee") charged with researching and reporting on the Town's actual community safety needs. The Committee's purpose is to give the Select Board and residents an evidence-based picture of community safety in Bethel. Built from stakeholder interviews and available data rather than relying on assumption or anecdote when the Town considers how to fund and structure public safety services going forward.

The Town has spent several budget cycles debating the cost of one specific service (Oxford County enhanced service patrol coverage) without a clear picture of what residents, schools, and behavioral health providers actually identify as safety needs. At the June 2026 town meeting, voters rejected the proposed enhanced coverage budget line by a significant margin; the vote reflected unresolved concerns about both cost and whether the contract structure matches the Town's actual needs. A dedicated committee would be tasked with the following:

- Identify and interview key stakeholders invested in community safety and well-being, including but not limited to: the SAD 44 Superintendent and school administration, school counselors, drug and alcohol counselors and other local behavioral health providers, the Bethel Fire Department and ambulance service, the Oxford County Sheriff's Office, and residents. Identify community safety needs across a broad definition of safety including youth and behavioral health, substance use, traffic and pedestrian safety, proven preventative measures, emergency medical response, and domestic and interpersonal safety.
- Review available quantitative data, including monthly Sheriff's Office call logs and any other public safety, EMS, or school incident data the Town can obtain.
- Identify gaps between current services and the needs identified through the research above.
- Prepare a written report to the Select Board summarizing findings and offering specific, actionable and proven recommendations backed by reputable data sources, to be delivered in advance of the FY27 budget cycle.
- Present findings at a public Select Board meeting and be available to answer resident questions ahead of any related town meeting vote.

Recommended Timeline

Interview-based research of this kind takes real time to do well: behavioral health and substance use providers need time to participate without compromising client confidentiality, schools generally reflect patterns more reliably over a full academic year than a partial one, and a rushed report risks reproducing the same problem this Committee is meant to solve, recommendations based on incomplete information. At the same time, the Town's FY28 budget cycle begins in March 2027, and the Select Board should not go into that cycle with nothing to show for this effort.

The recommended approach is a two-phase timeline that gives the Committee an honest runway while still keeping the Board informed ahead of the FY28 cycle:

Phase 1 — September 2026 through February 2027: Formation and Preliminary Findings

- Sept. 2026 – Jan 2027: Select Board adopts the charge, appoints members, and holds an organizational meeting. The committee begins stakeholder interviews and requests available data (call logs, EMS/fire data, school incident data where appropriate and available).
- Feb. 2027: Committee delivers a brief preliminary findings memo to the Select Board, not final recommendations, summarizing what has been learned so far and flagging any urgent, low-cost items the Board may want to act on ahead of FY28. This keeps the Board informed without pressuring the Committee into premature conclusions.

Phase 2 — March 2027 through January 2028: Full Research and Final Report

- Mar.–Sept. 2027: Committee completes stakeholder interviews (including a full school-year cycle of input from schools and counselors), deepens data review, and considers a resident survey if warranted.
- Oct.–Dec. 2027: Committee drafts findings and recommendations; internal review.
- Jan. 2028: Committee presents its full, final report and recommendations to the Select Board and residents at a public meeting, in time to inform the FY29 budget cycle.

Proposed Committee Composition

A committee of 7–9 members is recommended, balancing subject-matter expertise with resident representation. This committee aims to fill the following seats to represent key insight:

- A School district representative: SAD 44 Superintendent or designee, to speak to youth safety and school-based concerns.
- A Bethel Fire Department representative
- A Bethel EMS and Rescue Services representative
- A current or retired law enforcement representative

Additional recommended committee members include those with the following expertise:

- School counselor: Direct insight into student well-being and early warning signs the Committee should weigh.
- Behavioral health / substance use professionals: Local drug and alcohol counselors or providers, to represent intervention needs.
- 2–3 seats, appointed by the Select Board, to ensure the report reflects community perspective, not only institutional voices.

Recommended Stakeholder Interviews

The following individuals and organizations are recommended as interview subjects during Phase 1 and Phase 2; this list is a starting point and is not intended to limit the Committee's outreach. The Committee is encouraged to expand it as research proceeds.

- Town Manager, Code Enforcement Officer, and town department heads: given their day-to-day management of Town operations, infrastructure, and staffing, department heads are well positioned to speak to how safety needs intersect with roads, facilities, and other Town operations.

- Heads of relevant organizations engaged in community well being: Bethel Food Bank and District Exchange, Bethel Public Library staff, local faith community leaders, youth-serving nonprofits and mentoring organizations, elder serving organizations, and more.
- Additional representatives of organizations represented by a seat on the board to ensure multiple perspectives.
- Residents at large, including youth voices such as high school students

Interviewing a broad set of stakeholders will help ensure the Committee's report reflects the full range of factors that shape community safety in Bethel, rather than any single service or department.

Precedent: How Other Communities Have Approached This

This model is not novel. Several municipalities, including two in Maine, have used a similar committee-based approach to ground public safety decisions in evidence rather than assumption.

Portland, Maine — Health & Human Services and Public Safety Committee

Portland maintains a standing council committee that pairs public health and public safety under a single mandate. Its explicit purpose is to develop policy recommendations that improve the quality of life, health, and safety of residents, treating safety as a broad, cross-departmental concern rather than a policing-only issue.

Source: City of Portland, Health & Human Services & Public Safety Committee (portlandmaine.gov)

Orono, Maine — Good Neighbor Committee

The Orono Town Council formed an ad hoc committee to study a specific, community-identified safety problem (disorderly conduct connected to university housing) and return with concrete recommendations.

Source: News Center Maine, "Orono Town Council tackles safety issues with committee recommendations"

Somerville, Massachusetts — Public Safety Task Forces

Somerville convened parallel task forces: a Civilian Oversight Task Force and a Public Safety for All Task Force to study trust, accountability, and equity in public safety.

Source: City of Somerville, "Somerville Releases Public Safety Task Force Reports"

Cost and Resource Implications

This proposal does not require new appropriated funds. The Committee is proposed as a volunteer body, consistent with Bethel's other standing committees. Anticipated Town staff support is limited to: meeting scheduling/posting (Town Office), provision of existing call-log data (Town Manager), and minutes/records support. Should the Committee wish to conduct a broader resident survey, a modest cost may be identified and brought back to the Board separately.