From: James Kerr <jkerr@petersburgak.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, October 28, 2026 9:21 AM
To: Assembly <assembly@petersburgak.gov>; Stephen Giesbrecht <sgiesbrecht@petersburgak.gov>
Cc: Department Heads <department_heads@petersburgak.gov>; Randal Holmgrain <rholmgrain@petersburgak.gov>
Subject: Critical Police Department Staffing, Recruitment, and Retention Crisis

Mayor and Assembly Members,

I am writing to provide an update of the critical staffing, recruitment, and retention crisis facing the Petersburg Police Department. The department has reached a point where the present staffing model is not sustainable, and wages and retention must be addressed.

Current Staffing

The Police Department currently has two vacant police officer positions. In addition:

- A Police Sergeant has submitted written notice of his intent to resign, although an exact departure date has not yet been provided.
- Another officer is going through the hiring process with another agency and has received a conditional job offer.

If both employees leave, the department will have four vacant sworn positions out of nine authorized positions. This would leave nearly half of the department's sworn positions vacant and include the loss of an experienced supervisor.

Dispatch/Corrections currently has four vacant positions, with only three of seven authorized positions filled. The Police Captain continues to cover dispatch shifts to keep the Communications Center operational. Police officers have also been required to cover dispatch shifts when a dispatcher is unavailable or on leave. This further reduces patrol coverage and takes command personnel away from supervision, investigations, training, recruitment, scheduling, policy development, and other required responsibilities.

If the anticipated sworn departures occur, the Police Department will have four sworn vacancies and four Dispatch/Corrections vacancies a total of eight vacancies among 16 authorized positions. Half of the department's authorized workforce would be vacant.

Recruitment History

The department has not received a completed police officer application since October 2025, more than one year ago. The last completed Dispatch/Corrections application was received in December 2025 and is approaching the one-year mark.

The Borough has already increased the advertised starting wages to $35.50 per hour for Police Officer and $29.81 per hour for Dispatch/Corrections Officer. Despite advertising these higher wages, the department has not received new completed applications. The market response demonstrates that the increased rates are still not sufficient to overcome Petersburg's recruitment challenges.

Competitive Wages

At $35.50 per hour, Petersburg's advertised Police Officer wage equals approximately $73,840 annually. Current Alaska job-market data places the median advertised police officer salary at approximately $87,763 annually. Juneau is advertising entry-level officer positions at $41.84 to $43.30 per hour, while other Alaska agencies offer similarly higher wages and, in some cases, substantial hiring incentives.

Petersburg advertises Dispatch/Corrections at $29.81 per hour, or approximately $62,005 annually. Current dispatcher postings include approximately $31.09 to $32.18 per hour in Juneau and $38.17 to $52.53 per hour in Anchorage. Petersburg's employees also perform the combined responsibilities of emergency communications and municipal corrections.

Benefits are important, but applicants compare the actual wages available to pay for housing, food, utilities, transportation, and other living expenses. The lack of applications after the advertised wage increases is evidence that Petersburg's current compensation is still not competitive enough.

Housing Availability and Affordability

Housing makes the wage problem more difficult. A review of publicly available housing on October 27 found no long-term Petersburg rentals listed on the major housing platforms reviewed. Private or word-of-mouth rentals may occasionally become available, but an applicant considering relocation cannot readily locate and secure housing through the normal public market.

The conventional in-town homes reviewed were generally listed between approximately $299,000 and $398,000. Some lower-priced properties were remote, lacked standard residential features, or would not provide practical housing for an employee relocating to Petersburg.

Using the generally accepted standard that housing should not exceed approximately 30% of gross income:

- The advertised Police Officer wage supports approximately $1,846 per month in total housing expenses.
- The advertised Dispatch/Corrections wage supports approximately $1,550 per month in total housing expenses.

For illustration, financing a $299,000 home with 5% down at the current average 30-year mortgage rate would result in principal and interest of approximately $1,951 per month. That does not include property taxes, homeowners insurance, mortgage insurance, utilities, maintenance, or closing costs.

Even with 20% down, which would require approximately $59,800 in cash, principal and interest would be about $1,643 per month before the other costs of ownership. That already exceeds the Dispatch/Corrections housing threshold and leaves very little room under the Police Officer threshold once taxes, insurance, utilities, and maintenance are included.

Local Recruitment

The Borough cannot rely solely on attracting experienced lateral applicants from other agencies. If lateral applicants are not applying, the Borough must make these positions attractive to qualified members of the local community and be prepared to train them.

Police and Dispatch/Corrections positions must pay enough for local residents to view them as desirable, sustainable careers. Community members will not accept the responsibilities, rotating shifts, weekends, holidays, mandatory overtime, background requirements, emergency decision-making, and personal risks associated with these positions unless the compensation reasonably reflects those demands and Petersburg's cost of living.

Need for Immediate Action

This is no longer a potential staffing concern. It is an active operational crisis. The department cannot continue indefinitely by relying on the Chief and remaining officers to cover patrol vacancies while the Captain and officers cover Dispatch/Corrections shifts.

The Borough has already tested whether the recently increased advertised wages would produce applicants. They have not. Continuing to advertise the same positions at rates that have produced no applicants will not solve the problem.

I am asking the Assembly to address competitive compensation, longevity, and employee retention as urgent public-safety priorities. Any compensation plan must be sufficient not only to attract applicants but also to retain the trained and experienced employees the Borough has already invested in.

The Borough must provide appropriate and livable wages if it intends to maintain reliable police, emergency-dispatch, corrections, and community-jail services. The Petersburg Police Department cannot continue operating under the current staffing conditions.

Respectfully,

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