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Time for action is now

The Gloucester Police Department is dysfunctional. And while there is continuing discussion about it, nothing is being done about it.

It was dysfunctional in late January, when Patrolman Stephen Lamberis returned to work after a 17-month suspension that even the city's lawyers said could not have been defended if challenged in court. After those 17 months, a department that is supposed to be expert in investigations still had not completed its investigation into whether the stated reasons for Lamberis' suspension could be substantiated.

For that 17-month vacation, Lamberis collected a cool \$135,000, including a \$25,000 settlement payment for a promise not to sue the city.

It was dysfunctional three weeks later, when city councilors had police Chief John Beaudette before them and learned that the chief had not yet spoken a word to Lamberis since his return.

It was dysfunctional a few weeks after that, when Lamberis filed four grievances over pay disputes and what he claimed were punitive work assignments in violation of the union contract.

It was dysfunctional in March, when tension between the chief and his subordinates boiled over, and union leaders sent a bitter letter to this newspaper, complaining of stalled contract negotiations and the chief's "expensive mistreatment" of Lamberis (the patrolman's union is still without a contract after nearly five years; the superior officers have agreed to terms of one).

And it remains dysfunctional today, nearly two years after the Lamberis suspension began and more than three months after he returned to work.

Worst of all, Mayor John Bell, city councilors and Chief Beaudette are still just talking about it.

According to Bell, he is "working with" the chief to address "issues" regarding the investigation and discipline of police officers. But, no changes have been made.

What is it going to take to prompt change? How much time is it going to take? The police chief is responsible for the functioning of that department. If he can't improve an obviously dysfunctional operation, Bell has to do more than say he's "working with" him.

The chief has to be more forthcoming. At present, he refuses to discuss the department with the media. That is unacceptable. He is the head of a city department, funded with tax dollars.

Bell has said communication has to be better - that if there is a serious personnel problem in any city department, "having supervisors bring those situations to our attention immediately for immediate action is imperative."

Whether Bell was officially notified, everybody knew Lamberis was suspended in the fall of 2005. Haven't the past 20 months offered more than enough time for "immediate action"?

While city officials talk about "dialogue" and meet secretly to discuss the fallout from the Lamberis case, nothing is changing.

The mayor is correct that "immediate action is imperative." But those words have to mean something. The talk has to end. Things need to change, now.