

LA POINTE FILES NOTICE OF CLAIM AGAINST ASHLAND COUNTY

The Town of La Pointe is taking action to stop Ashland County from taxing Town property owners for services the County fails to deliver.

The initial focus is law enforcement. In 2023, property owners in La Pointe will have to pay more than \$375,000 in taxes for patrol services that the County sheriff's department says it will not provide.

On Nov. 15, 2022, the County Board adopted its 2023 budget without including payment to the Town. For 27 years, that arrangement had been used to purchase law enforcement services from the La Pointe Police Department. By doing so, the County was relieved from providing those services directly. Under Wisconsin law, Sheriffs are legally responsible for police protection in townships.

Under the arrangement, the County refunded a small portion of La Pointe's property taxes. The refund helped La Pointe maintain its own police force, which provides 24/7 coverage for Town residents, businesses, and visitors. The agreement also freed sheriff's deputies from having to regularly patrol or reliably respond to calls in the Town, which is on Madeline Island, 20 miles away by road from the nearest mainland portion of the County – plus a ferry ride.

By unilaterally terminating the agreement, the County now is legally obligated to provide La Pointe the same level of coverage that it provides to the rest of the County. However, newly elected Sheriff Brian Zupke -- who publicly supported continuing the arrangement with the Town -- told the La Pointe Town Board on Dec. 27, 2022, that the County Board did not give his department the resources or staffing he needs to extend coverage to La Pointe.

The sheriff told Town officials that, because of La Pointe's geographic location, they should not expect daily patrols in La Pointe, automatic response to emergencies, or reliable backup for Town officers, all of which the Sheriff's Department provides to communities on the mainland in Ashland County.

"What the County Board and the county administrator did is nothing but a premeditated cash grab," said La Pointe Town Administrator Michael Kuchta. "The only way for them to provide equal service to La Pointe is to reduce service to other communities, which doesn't benefit anyone. That's the reality they refuse to face."

The disparity in coverage is most evident when comparing La Pointe with Mellen, a city in southern Ashland County that also has its own police department. Statistics show that, in 2021 and 2022 combined, deputies responded 981 times in Mellen. They responded only 1 time in La Pointe.

"Mellen gets more service in one day that La Pointe gets in one year," Kuchta said. "The County's claim that La Pointe taxpayers get the same level of service is blatantly false." In fact, Ashland County officials suggested publicly that they might rely on Bayfield County to respond in La Pointe.

La Pointe is 2.7 percent of Ashland County's population, but provides 21 percent of the County's property-tax revenue. The \$375,000 that La Pointe taxpayers send to the sheriff's department is more than the City of Mellen pays to support all County departments combined.

In 2022, the County paid the Town \$135,000 to provide law enforcement that the County otherwise would have had to provide. Without a similar \$135,000 payment in 2023, La Pointe can provide full-time

police coverage only by going into debt, Kuchta said. Beyond the money La Pointe taxpayers send to the Sheriff's Department, they also pay \$285,000 more to support the Town of La Pointe Police Department through the Town's own tax levy.

La Pointe filed paperwork with the Ashland County Clerk on January 11 known as a Notice of Circumstances of Claim. The notice informs the County that the Town and individual property owners in the Town will pursue legal remedies in court unless the County reverses its decision. The formal claim will be filed by March 15.

"We need to guarantee adequate police coverage for our community – just as every other Ashland County community needs," said Glenn Carlson, Town Chair of La Pointe. "We can't do that if we're forced to pay \$375,000 to the County for services they are legally required to provide, but don't."