

# Somerset County gets new patrol dog

County commissioners Wednesday agreed to buy Kojo, who will replace Ruger, who is retiring, as the sheriff department's tracking and drug-search dog.

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SKOWHEGAN — Somerset County commissioners had a four-legged visitor during their regular meeting Wednesday — Kojo, the county's newest patrol dog.

Kojo — pronounced “Coy-Ooh” — visited each of the county officials at their seats Wednesday, at one point jumping with his front paws onto the commissioners' table in a spirited greeting.



Cpl David Cole of the Somerset County Sheriff's Department poses Wednesday with the county's new patrol dog, 15-month old Kojo, a Belgian malinois. Purchase of the dog was approved Wednesday by county commissioners. *Contributed photo*

“He’s only had one training session so far,” County Administrator Dawn DiBlasi told commissioners. “He has a ways to go.”

Commissioners agreed 4-0 to a sale agreement to buy the 15-month-old Belgian malinois for \$6,500. Sheriff Dale Lancaster told commissioners the price ordinarily would have been closer to \$8,500 for the dog, but it was reduced because he was used as a demonstration dog by the breeders.

Kojo is being trained in basic obedience and will start training for tracking and building searches with his handler, Cpl. David Cole. The county’s current tracking dog, Ruger, is 10 years old and will be transitioned into retirement. Ruger is a trained drug-sniffing dog and will continue to be used in drug searches during Kojo’s training, Lancaster said.

Training for Kojo is expected to take 15 to 20 weeks.

Commissioners also were scheduled to approve the hiring of new patrol deputies for the Madison Division of the sheriff’s department, but Lancaster asked them to table the motion until prospective officers could undergo polygraph testing and background checks. The matter will be revisited in the coming weeks, Lancaster said.

Madison police officers [now are operating under the oversight of the sheriff’s department](#) after a one-year contract between the town and county went into effect in July. The move was presented originally as a cost-saving measure by town officials and was approved by residents in June at the Town Meeting at a cost of \$480,728 per year.

The agreement states that the sheriff will provide five full-time deputies and one assistant executive secretary for 24-hour police coverage in Madison. It also states that all deputies assigned to Madison are to remain in the town during regularly assigned patrol shifts and that Madison would retain its police station. In the event of an emergency outside of Madison, deputies will respond in a way similar to that of police departments that assist neighboring towns under mutual-aid agreements, according to the contract.

The town previously paid about \$610,000 annually for law enforcement and plans to save about \$130,000 a year with the change.

Lancaster said the Madison division is down to three patrol officers from a full compliment of five officers. He said longtime Officer Joe Mitchell has retired and Officer Bret Lowell left for a job with the Augusta Police Department. Former Madison Police Chief Barry Moores also retired,

reflecting much of the projected savings in salary and benefits by the town not having to pay for a police chief.

The agreement with the sheriff's department was seen as a way to reduce municipal costs in the wake of a huge loss in tax revenue caused by a sharply reduced tax assessment of Madison Paper Industries, Lancaster said Wednesday.

"I think they're doing fairly well," Lancaster said of the first four months of the transition. He said he is working with Madison Town Manager Tim Curtis to assure a smooth transition.

He said the plan is to hire two full-time police officers and to keep one more as a reserve officer "to get them familiar with the town." The town will have five patrol officers in place next month. None of them has been to the Maine Criminal Justice Academy, and the town will have to pick up the cost of that training program.

Also on Wednesday, commissioners agreed to buy four new trucks for the sheriff's department from Hight Chevrolet in Skowhegan for a final price, with trade allowance on the older trucks, of \$92,440.

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