

Falmouth Road Race Appeals To The Select Board To Increase Cap On Runners

- By NOELLE ANNONEN

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The Falmouth Road Race Committee appealed to the select board on Monday, April 25, to allow an increase in the number of runners in the August event. After hearing arguments from the committee and public safety officials before a crowded room, the board tabled the issue until its next meeting on May 9.

The Falmouth Road Race Inc. initially applied to the recreation committee for a field of 15,000 runners. The recreation committee, however, approved the race for 10,000 runners. The race committee asked the select board to raise the number to 12,800.

“Most people in Falmouth, who love this race, have no idea that they are not going to have this opportunity,” Kira Grant Edwards said. Dr. Edwards is a pediatric doctor in Falmouth.

Scott Ghelfi, president of the board of directors for the Falmouth Road Race, said that the cap will only exclude Falmouth residents. The field currently includes 6,000 who were deferred from last year’s race, which was capped to 8,000 because of COVID-19, and 3,500 registration spots have already been sold to charities. This only leaves 500 spots that Falmouth residents would have to compete for with sponsors, Mr. Gelfi said.

“They may likely run unregistered anyway,” Mr. Ghelfi said.

Mr. Ghelfi’s initial request to the board to bump the cap to 12,800 racers was met with applause from the audience.

Police Chief Edward A. Dunne said the race should be capped at 10,000 for safety reasons.

“I can’t guarantee the safety of this community,” Chief Dunne said. “What if something goes wrong? You’ll have me in front of the board trying to explain it.”

Although previous races have gone on without major incident, the police department has an all-time low staff, Chief Dunne said. He said he will only have 42 police officers available during the race, and a cap of 10,000 was a compromise for the 50th running of the race.

Select board member Samuel H. Patterson told Chief Dunne this new number appears to be unrelated to COVID-19.

“Really, this is a limit that will be used hereafter,” Mr. Patterson said. Chief Dunne agreed.

“For many years, we’ve gone into that weekend keeping our fingers crossed, holding our breath,” Chief Dunne said. The growth of the town—and subsequently the race—over the last 10 years has put a strain on the police department. “We never addressed it until COVID, and then we had the opportunity to look at it.”

Select board chairman Douglas C. Brown asked Chief Dunne if civilians could supplement the police force. Chief Dunne said that, while volunteers would be welcome, he would not lift the current cap on racers because he would have to re-station police officers from traffic flaggers to security positions.

Select board member Megan English Braga asked Mr. Ghelfi if they could reschedule the race for fall or if they could stagger the beginning of the race, which they already do.

Members of the community spoke in favor of allowing Falmouth residents to register by lifting the cap to 12,800 runners. Nearly all shared anecdotes about their experiences with the race to demonstrate what it means to the town. People spoke about what the race means to their families, how they run it together, and nearly all comments affirming that the race cap should be raised were met with applause.

“When I’m at the start of the race, I feel so proud to be part of this community, where 12,000 people commit to running seven miles every August,” Dr. Edwards said.

“The Falmouth Road Race is the thing that puts us in an elite Boston class,” Dr. Greg Parkinson said. “We need something to look forward to. Many of us need that. The people of Falmouth have been blindsided.”

“I quit smoking and started running the year after I watched my first road race,” Barbara P. Schneider said. “It has helped me in my life immensely.” She also said she thinks that there will be a lot of issues stemming from people running in the race without registering.

One community member emphasized that race organizers are very diligent with cleanup and crowd control. Another said that all Falmouth residents are respectful and law-abiding and would not be a concern for officers.

Both race officials and police said they were blindsided—the police by the race’s request for 15,000 runners and the race officials by the low cap on runners.

Ms. English Braga disagreed.

“It’s not out of nowhere and it’s not as if there hasn’t been room for discussion,” Ms. Braga said. “And the proposal came in February. It didn’t leave a lot of room for discussion, so we’re trying to have it now.”

Ms. English Braga asked Mr. Ghelfi if there would be a smaller number he could give them to supplement the Falmouth runners who have been cut out as an alternative to the additional 2,800 he has requested. He said that there may be extra room if some who deferred from last year do not register by the deadline on Saturday, April 30.

“There’s no other time I’ve heard the police chief say he can’t guarantee public safety,” Ms. English Braga said.

The select board moved to postpone the vote until their next meeting on May 9. They asked Mr. Ghelfi to come back with a definite number of openings based on deferral registration.

“It will be our responsibility,” Mr. Brown said. “It will be our risk.”