

## **Falmouth Road Race Capped At 10,000 Runners, Rec Committee To Appeal To Select Board**

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The 2022 Falmouth Road Race will be capped at 10,000 runners, a decrease from the traditionally approved 12,800 runners in past years.

At last week's Falmouth Recreation Committee meeting, committee member and Falmouth Road Race president Scott Ghelfi said that Town Manager Julian Suso made the decision to cap the race at 10,000 at the recommendation of Police Chief Edward A. Dunne, who cited concerns about public safety and a lack of manpower on the police force.

"There are no safety issues," Mr. Ghelfi said. "This race has gone on for 50 years; there has been nothing that has ever really happened other than inconveniences."

This is the first year, Mr. Ghelfi said, that the select board voted to take special events off its plate, as these types of decisions would typically fall under its jurisdiction. Instead, the decision was left to Mr. Suso.

Recreation committee chairwoman Sandra Cuny said she understands that the chief is short on officers and asked if the difference between 10,000 and 12,800 is really that significant.

Mr. Ghelfi said that when he asked the chief if he would even feel the difference of 2,800 runners, the chief replied, "Probably not."

"We're in a situation now where that decrease in field size, that is over \$300,000 that would go back to the community because we give everything back [to the community]," Mr. Ghelfi told the recreation committee. "Do the math: 2,800 times our fee, plus some sponsorship money that we're going to lose because of it: over \$300,000—which is a huge shame."

The real kicker, Mr. Ghelfi said, is that because of the way the pandemic impacted the road race the past two years, the race had deferred 6,000 runners from previous years and promised them that they can run this year. Between the 6,000 deferred runners and the 3,400 runners already paid for and signed up through the road race's charity program, the road race is already extremely close to hitting its 10,000 registrants' limit.

"We are done, we are full," Mr. Ghelfi told the committee. "Most of the 6,000 are not Falmouth runners. So normally, 2,500 to 3,000 Falmouth runners sign up—we won't have a registration. Falmouth runners, for the most part, won't be able to run the Falmouth Road Race this year if it stays at 10,000."

The committee was concerned with the lack of available spots for local runners. Mr. Ghelfi pointed out that, in the middle of the pandemic last year and following 2020's home edition of the road race, the special events committee approved 12,800 runners, but the road race decided to cut it to 8,000, due to its own concerns regarding COVID.

"We went to the town and said we're going to do 8,000 [in 2021]," Mr. Ghelfi said. "We want to just go at it slowly; we're going to do 8,000 this year. Well, the chief liked it at 8,000. We signed up 8,000 and 6,000 ran and he was like, 'This is nice, this is easy.' So that was sort of his motivation for trying to shrink it. He says public safety, but I think it's more that he likes it small."

Chief Dunne said this week that his main concern has been the growth of both the town and the race while the 44-man police staff struggles to keep up each summer, special events aside. But with last year's race capped at 8,000, the chief said the police department found it much more manageable and comfortable than previous races.

"We had an opportunity to get a different perspective of how we operate in town and how we operate the road race and how we serve the community," Chief Dunne said. "That's one thing people forget: it's seven miles for the road race [from] Woods Hole to Falmouth Heights but there are still 44 square miles that we have to deal with that day. So as a public safety aspect, we wanted a lower number."

Despite comfort with the number of runners capped at 8,000, Chief Dunne said he understands that this is the race's 50th anniversary and that 10,000 was a compromise.

"I know they want 12,800 but that's 12,800 runners, and everybody brings one or two or three people with them, so you've got 45,000 people here. So that number just increases that much further; the services increase that much further...I can't control the growth of the town, that's out of my hands. We're a seasonal community and we deal with that but the only thing we have control over is the size of the events. And if I let the events keep growing with the town, that's irresponsible as the police chief in charge of public safety," he said.

Chief Dunne said the difference felt between the normal 12,800 runners and the 8,000 last year was "huge." Between being able to open all of the roads by lunchtime to sending his staff—all of whom are mandated to work on the Sunday of the race—home early and returning to normal town routines, the benefits were plentiful.

"It was amazing, and as far as I know, everybody still had a good time," he said. "The business community was still busy [because] it's summertime [and] I believe they were able to give out 70 scholarships last year."

The road race mandates road closures, which causes gridlocked traffic throughout the congested roadways surrounding the already compact Woods Hole and Falmouth Heights neighborhoods. Gridlock can be more than an inconvenience for Falmouth residents, said Christopher Campbell, the town's communications administrator.

"When you have that amount of gridlock in the town, it's not just Falmouth that is impacted," he said. "It impacts the other communities around us. We have one of two hospitals on the Cape, so when you start looking at Mashpee, Bourne, Sandwich, and all the other communities locally around us that transport emergency patients to Falmouth Hospital, they have to negotiate through that traffic as well."

Traffic situations are worse in Woods Hole, where would-be Vineyard goers get caught up in the traffic, buses get delayed and runners roam the streets on their way toward the starting line.

“I’ve had this conversation with the road race committee in the past because they always wanted to grow it beyond what it was and I always told them, ‘No, not until you can get it right,’” Chief Dunne said.

“They still couldn’t get everybody down to Woods Hole and when those buses get jammed up on Woods Hole Road, they start letting runners off on the street....It’s a disaster just waiting to happen. We can’t just wait for something bad to happen to say, you know what, we probably shouldn’t have done this.”

Chief Dunne pointed out that the Boston Marathon typically has just more than double the number of runners the Falmouth Road Race does, but the marathon has 3,500 police officers from the surrounding eight communities.

“I bet you there wasn’t another event in any of those communities during the marathon,” chief Dunne said. “We have an event: it’s summertime on Cape Cod. That is the event.”

The police station is funded for 67 positions as of July as per Town Meeting in November, but has only 44 police officers on staff right now. In response to the lack of officers for the race, the recreation committee discussed reaching out to neighboring communities and organizations. Chief Dunne said he has already reached out to neighboring communities, the state police, and the sheriff for assistance on road race day, but has received very few responses.

“It’s summertime, and their communities are busy, just as busy as we are,” he said.

Falmouth Police Captain Brian L. Reid said that for the police and fire staff the road race is a three-day event, not a three-hour event. Between Friday, Saturday and Sunday with

restaurants, bars and beaches full each day, Mr. Campbell said, emergency responders see upward of 500 service calls.

“I think we’ve been successful over the years of not having anything, the train [not] leaving the track or anything like that because the personnel is able to handle it,” Chief Dunne said. “We have smart people, both in the police and fire [departments]. My command staff and his command staff are able to manage not only the event but the community at the same time and we’ve been fortunate, but what happens if we aren’t?”

Community safety measures for the event include a unified command post where the police and fire departments can work together to manage the race. Plans are in place should a major event occur, and communication between the public safety staffs and the race staff is crucial, Fire Chief Timothy R. Smith said.

“We’ve done this for several years in this platform and it’s improved our response greatly,” he said. “So we are prepared; it’s just that we just don’t know what’s going to happen. We’re ready, but it’s going to be managed to the best of our ability with the resources we all have.”

Capt. Reid, who sits on the special events committee, said that clear communication with the organization planning the event is the key to getting events approved the way they are envisioned.

Mr. Ghelfi told the recreation committee that the road race first learned of the recommended 10,000-runner cap at the February 25 meeting of the special events committee and felt “blindsided” by it, as the race has been approved for 12,800 runners for more than 10 years.

On the other hand, it was the police who said they felt blindsided by the road race’s initial application, which included requests for an increase in runners to 15,000, a band at the ballpark in Falmouth Heights, and a beer garden serving alcohol at the park.

Public safety partners were never notified of the road race committee's intentions to grow the event, Capt. Reid said.

"These were all things that they just did on their own autonomously without having any conversation with our public safety partners," he said. "So blindsided was how we felt when we saw this application come before the special events committee meeting with no discussion and no consideration to how it would impact us and our operations...for them to say they were blindsided, I would say it's only a product of their lack of effort to communicate with us at all prior to the meeting."

Mr. Ghelfi confirmed that the initial application asked for 15,000 runners, a beer garden and entertainment. In a phone call with the Enterprise, he said that application was withdrawn, once the applicant learned of the recommended 10,000-runner cap at the special events committee.

He told the recreation committee last week that the race committee pleaded its case at the most recent special events committee meeting, having submitted a new application requesting the traditional 12,800 runners. But, Mr. Ghelfi said, neither the police chief nor the town manager were present at that meeting; Assistant Town Manager Peter Johnson-Staub and Capt. Reid served as surrogates.

Additionally, Capt. Reid said it is a well-known fact that unregistered runners jump in and run the race throughout the course of the event, and this information was volunteered at a previous special events committee meeting by Carl Cavossa, a member of the road race board of directors.

"So what's the actual count of people that have come to the finish line? That's why we have to be really, really firm on the number of registered runners because whether or not all the registered runners show up has nothing to do with how many people are actually crossing the finish line, because in his own words, people jump in—a lot of people," Capt. Reid said.

Chief Dunne said he would be amenable to 12,800 runners or even 15,000 runners, but only if the event was moved to an offseason date.

“Something has to give,” Chief Dunne said. “The road race does wonderful things for the community, but our job is public safety and the community. If we’re not providing the community the services that they need that day or that weekend, that falls back on us.”

Aside from the number of people that will be turned away due to the cap on runners, the recreation committee is concerned largely about the loss of \$300,000 worth of revenue from the road race that would have gone back to the community.

“[Giving back] is the theme of the road race,” committee member Robert Brown said at last week’s meeting. “There are probably more projects in the town that have been supported by the road race than haven’t.”

“If you’re a resident of Falmouth right now,” Mr. Ghelfi began, “and haven’t benefitted from the race in some way, shape, or form directly [or] through a nonprofit...”

“Then you haven’t asked,” Ms. Cuny finished. “Because all you’ve got to do is ask.”

The committee—barring Mr. Ghelfi, who abstained from voting due to his affiliation with the race—voted unanimously to send a letter to the select board to support the request for 12,800 runners and ask the select board to override the town manager’s decision.

The committee is prepared to go before the select board on Monday, April 25, to appeal the decision of the town manager to cap the race at 10,000 runners. Mr. Ghelfi did say there is a meeting with both the police chief and town manager scheduled to hopefully hash out the issue before it gets to the select board.

“Hopefully we can discuss and work something out because we really don’t want to appeal,” Mr. Ghelfi said this week. “We feel this is a lot of money that we give back to the community....We feel we have to work hard and fight for that.”

If things cannot be worked out, Mr. Ghelfi said, the committee will go before the select board as planned.

“We look forward to working with [the road race committee],” Chief Dunne said. “I told them we’ll work together. We can agree to disagree, I guess, on the number. The 10,000 could be a stretch for us, too, but it is the 50th anniversary. But as the fire chief said, we’re already gearing up for probably one of the busiest summers we’ve had in the last two years.”