

Selectman admits mistake in OK'ing police vehicle lease

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ATKINSON — Selectmen Chairman Philip V. Consentino said he made an honest mistake when he ordered a sports utility vehicle last month without getting a formal vote by the selectmen or Town Meeting voters.

The prepared statement from Consentino, who is also the police chief, came a week after he cut Budget Committee Chairman Mark Acciard short at a selectmen's meeting, shouted him down and refused to allow the selectmen to reply to any questions about the vehicle lease.

But the chief's explanation failed to satisfy the Budget Committee. Acciard said the committee will invite all the selectmen to an upcoming meeting to deal with the fallout over the car lease and the size of the Police Department's fleet. That meeting could happen as early as May 2, he said.

Yesterday, former Budget Committee Chairwoman Jane Cole said more was at stake than the money — \$5,600 for the first year of the lease. She said the selectmen lost their integrity in Monday's flap over the lease of the Ford Expedition for the Police Department.

"I have a thing about the fairness and accuracy and integrity of the Board of Selectmen, and it's gone," said Cole, who spent 18 years as an administrative assistant in the selectmen's office.

Cole said all the selectmen know better than to lease a new vehicle without advance approval from Town Meeting. But Town Administrator Russell McAllister insists the selectmen did nothing illegal.

Cole disagrees.

"They did the wrong thing," she said, adding she is not talking

so talking about the other selectmen who tried to defend last month's lease as an "honest mistake," she said.

"More shameful than that," Cole said, arguing the selectmen "thumbed their nose" at the voters when they leased the car.

"Every time the town buys a piece of new equipment, it goes on a warrant," she said, referring to the agenda for Town Meeting.

Consentino said he originally meant to take the question about the lease to Town Meeting, but that his plan changed at the last minute because of a selectmen's meeting Feb. 12.

At that meeting, Brian Boyle, the former selectmen chairman, told him then there was "no need" to ask Town Meeting to increase the Police Department budget. This was because there was extra money in the police budget for health insurance that could be used to finance the car, Consentino said.

Consentino also said if he had it to do over again, he would have taken the request for the car lease directly to Town Meeting, as he originally planned.

"I listened to my chairman, my leader," said Consentino, adding if there were blame to go around, it should not fall entirely on his shoulders.

Boyle, who was home watching Monday's meeting on television, went to Town Hall to dispute Consentino's version of events. Boyle said he did want the Police Department to get the all-wheel drive vehicle, but he also wanted to see overall reductions in the size of the fleet.

Boyle also said Consentino knew better than to purchase a new vehicle without authorization.

"It was nothing more than a misunderstanding," Consentino