

Police merger up for debate

Some residents like the idea; others don't

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Daily Record/Sunday News
York Daily Record/Sunday News

Article Last Updated: 09/16/2007 05:19:11 PM EDT

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Sep 16, 2007 — Michael E. Newcomer Sr. thinks a proposal to consolidate police departments in the city and in neighboring communities makes sense.

It would give them more manpower in certain areas. It would allow the officers to communicate better. It would likely help police solve more crime.

"I think it would come out that they'd have a better police force," the 67-year-old York resident said.

Few residents had heard about the idea to consolidate the police departments in and around the City of York.

It was a recommendation made last week by Metro-York, a YorkCounts organization that looks for regional solutions to problems across the county.

Representatives from the City of York and West Manchester, Spring Garden, Springettsbury and York townships are involved in discussions about the possible consolidation.

Urban expert David Rusk called the police consolidation an important recommendation for the York area. "Big box" communities can accomplish more than a bunch of "little box" communities, he said.

To illustrate that point, Rusk said that residents in Albuquerque, N.M., a "big box" community, had a unified 911 system three months after the technology became available in 1968.

It took Ulster County, N.Y., which is made up of "little box" communities, until 1994 to get a unified 911 system. That came after two years of extensive negotiations.

Criminals aren't worried about where the boundaries are and "you've got to organize to deal with that," Rusk said.

The obvious challenge of merging such departments is a political one - the local elected officials and the citizenry they represent, Rusk said.

While one of the West Manchester Township supervisors has participated in Metro-York meetings, the entire board has not discussed the issue, township manager Jan Dell said.

Officials will have many issues to discuss, such as the level of service, the cost and how it would affect existing employees.

The West Manchester Township Police Department has a minimum staffing requirement that at least three officers must be working at all times, Dell said. He doesn't know if that would work out if all the departments merged.

"It has to make sense for us financially and service-wise," Dell said.

He fielded a few calls from residents who were surprised to hear about the idea.

"They didn't seem real flowery about it," Dell said.

Springettsbury Township sent out a news release Friday saying that while Metro-York has conducted research into the consolidation, the township itself has not done so. Springettsbury and Spring Garden townships are in the process of merging fire departments. This decision came after four years of research and review, according to the news release.

"Any future similar opportunities will be approached with the same careful consideration and thoroughness," it says.

Rep. Bev Mackereth, R-Spring Grove, said some people will try to claim that "this is just a bailout for the city." That's not what it is about; it's about efficiency and quality of service, she said.

Officials need to compile information and present it to the public so they can understand what it's all about, she said.

If a consolidation works out, that's great, she said. If it can't, everyone will know.

Some residents of the municipalities liked the idea, while others had questions about whether a merger would work.

"I don't see why they should change something that's been the same for years," said 18-year-old Leanna Quickel of York.

She's concerned that a police officer might not be working in each district, as is the case now.

Andy Combs, 40, of Springettsbury Township, said a consolidation wouldn't bother him unless it reduced the police force.

Laura Kulp, 39, of York Township, used to live in Los Angeles, so she's used to a "big box" community, as Rusk describes them.

A consolidated department would follow the same rules and regulations, she said. It might be able to get more funding, and it would likely provide better coverage.

It wouldn't be, "This is my area. This is your area," Kulp said.

"It works in bigger cities," she said. "I can't see why it wouldn't work here."

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Merger talks

Consolidation of police departments isn't the only issue on officials' minds right now.

Manchester Township will send a supervisor and recreation director Tim James to a meeting at the York City Ice Arena with York Mayor John Brenner and the city recreation staff to discuss the possibility of an inter-municipal recreation program. The meeting date has yet to be determined.

Brenner has invited elected officials and recreation staff from North York and West York, as well as Spring Garden, Springettsbury and West Manchester townships to attend the meeting.

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