

Officials mull combined police force for York City, townships

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York City's top police officer predicts that a dozen years from now, the city and its surrounding townships will be protected and served by one large, consolidated police force.

"I would say not only is it going to happen, I would say it has to happen," Police Commissioner Mark Whitman said. "Over the long haul ... crime will continue to escalate if we don't attack it in a different fashion. If we stay as is, we're going to be in trouble in five years, 10 years. Will (the greater York area) be livable in 20 years?"

For years, police have said that criminals don't respect municipal boundary lines -- that proceeds from shoplifting, burglaries or convenience-store robberies in neighboring townships are often used to buy drugs in York City.

Consolidating the city force with York Area Regional Police and forces in Springettsbury, Spring Garden and West Manchester townships is "an excellent idea" that would initially cost millions of dollars but, over time, reduce policing costs for the entire area and increase efficiency, Whitman said.

Local police officials noted that the idea is in its infancy, kindled by discussions by Metro-York, a YorkCounts initiative that's been meeting for more than a year to find solutions to problems in York-area municipalities, including policing, concentrated poverty, education and unequal tax bases.

Whitman said he and York Area Regional Police Chief Tom Gross were asked to make a presentation to a Metro-York municipal subcommittee about the idea of consolidation. Moving forward would be a complex and time-consuming process, the commissioner said.

Study essential: "We've got a lot of 'next steps,'" Whitman said -- perhaps the first being to commission the state to undertake a study of the costs, feasibility and projected effectiveness of such a move.

"We want a hard nuts-and-bolts study, to tell us what it would take. We're on board philosophically for these studies, but the devil is in the details," he said. "I don't think anybody is going to ... jump into it. You've got to see the pros and cons and weigh them all."

Gross also said the first step is a comprehensive study, and said he needed to emphasize the idea isn't a project of area police chiefs -- it's something being explored by a community group.

"I support the idea, and I feel strongly that it does require a lot of groundwork and a lot of feasibility work in a really detailed way," he said. "All the stakeholders, the rank and file officers, the elected officials -- everybody needs to support this, because from our experience in regionalizing before, if somebody's not 100-percent committed, it's very difficult to do."

Rising crime rates: Still, a York-area consolidated force would have more ability to put officers where they're needed and to train officers for specialized duties, Gross said.

"Crime is increasing dramatically, not just in the city but countywide, and we brought those statistics to the (Metro-York) group," Gross said. "Armed robberies tripled in our jurisdiction in 2006 -- it's a national trend. Crime is going up. Violent crime is going up. And it's primarily fueled by drugs and crosses municipal

boundaries."

Spring Garden Township Police Chief George Swartz also attended the Metro-York meetings and agreed the idea needs to be supported by elected officials, taxpayers and police.

"I think for efficiency of service and for providing effective police service, it is worth looking into," Swartz said. "There's some potential for creating a very efficient policing organization, although the elected officials and residents of Spring Garden Township will have the final say in the direction (the township) needs to go."

Working together: Swartz, Whitman and Gross all noted that law-enforcement agencies in York County have a history of working together. Examples include York County's Drug Task Force, Forensics Unit and Quick Response Team, all of which are made up of officers from around the county.

"We're very good in York County with cooperative initiatives," Swartz said, so being able to discuss something like consolidating police forces "is another extension of that partnership we enjoy."

Springettsbury Police Chief Dave Eshbach referred comment to township manager John Holman.

"Right now, the township is concentrating on our joint fire service, to ensure the success of that," Holman said. "Once we see we have a successful program in our joint fire service, we would look at the (proposed police merger) with some careful consideration and study, as we did with our fire service merger."

And if that happens, Holman said, "it would be a very public process ... with all stakeholders involved."

'Plenty to do': Eric Menzer, co-chair of Metro-York, said the idea "clearly has some traction," and that while there's "plenty of work to do" in moving the idea forward, the concept is strong.

The Metro-York municipal committee and the police chiefs have met two or three times, Menzer said, and have also met with the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency.

"To me, the very fact that people are willing to talk about this and are pushing to get it moving ahead faster than the rest of the work we're doing ... I think those are all very positive signs," he said. "But I don't think we should kid ourselves. ... There's a lot of potential obstacles."

Potential obstacles: Those obstacles could include bargaining issues with police unions, finding grant money to defray the costs, politics and public opinion, Whitman said.

"Any time there's change, you have to show the value of that change to people," he said. "Nobody's going to say yea or nay from the political side at this juncture, but the groundswell is not from police -- the groundswell is from John Q. Citizen."

The concept has worked in other areas, according to Whitman, and can be done.

"These discussions aren't for the faint of heart or those with round heels," he said. "It's going to be for those willing to make hard decisions and go forward. ... But philosophically, it's the right thing to do."

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