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York's studying regionalization, and so should we

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Because local government and parochial thinking often go hand in hand, I'm amazed at the way a regionalization proposal is gaining traction in York County.

Our neighbors to the west are talking about merging the York city and suburban police departments into one regional force.

Right now it's just talk. The idea of a single department, headed by one chief, serving the city and 11 surrounding municipalities, could stall.

But the fact that leaders from multiple municipalities have broached the concept suggests that people in the York area get it. They understand the future belongs to places where government services are regionalized and where people see themselves belonging to a community that transcends municipal boundaries.

This discussion in the greater York area is something Lancaster County should follow with interest and maybe envy.

Imagine the hubbub if Mayor Rick Gray joined with supervisors from neighboring townships in proposing one big police department.

Arresting development

We're so used to fragmented delivery of police services with most municipalities doing their own thing that, to my knowledge, no one has thought to ask if there's a better way.

That better way might be one force serving the city, East Petersburg and Millersville boroughs and East Hempfield, East Lampeter, Lancaster and Manheim townships.

Those seven municipalities are already working together (with four other municipalities) under a recently completed regional land-use comprehensive plan.

But is there a local government leader bold enough to say we might be safer if we stopped trying to go it alone and instead linked arms with our neighbors?

Proponents of a regional police force serving urban and suburban York County say the advantages are self-evident.

Regional policing allows for a pooling of resources and talent and a strategic allocation of services. It creates the opportunity for concerted police action, regardless of municipal boundaries. And a large force offering a variety of career paths within the department might help attract and retain good staff.

The hope, of course, is that a regional force would be more effective and economical.

"We're all one community," Mark Whitman, York's police commissioner, said of the greater York region. "Collectively, we can better address quality of life issues and go after criminals."

Badge of approval

The idea of a regional force came out of the work of a community-improvement organization called YorkCounts that is trying to save the York area from the downward spiral of concentrating poverty, blight and a declining tax base.

James DeBord, director of YorkCounts, said the call for consolidation came from several police chiefs. A state agency's offer to conduct a feasibility study has given the idea impetus. Finding an equitable funding mechanism will be key.

William Schenck, chairman of the board of supervisors in Springettsbury Township, York County, said that because the chief of the township's 28-officer force is open to consolidation, he thinks it's worth studying.

What appeals to Schenck is sharing administrative costs and creating task forces to better address issues such as traffic or illegal drugs.

"The one thing I believe to be true is that whatever problems the city is dealing with today (regarding public safety) will be problems for surrounding communities in the future," Schenck said.

It's enlightened self-interest, then, that may spur York and its suburbs to consolidate police services.

Leaders of greater Lancaster, please take note.

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