

Pooling police force

More municipalities seek lower-cost coverage. It might indicate a slow shift toward broader regionalization.

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By GIL SMART, Associate Editor

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They're also among the most expensive.

In the City of Lancaster, for example, 43 percent of general fund expenditures are on the Bureau of Police. Of the \$21.8 million the city will pay employees this year, \$11.97 million — 55 percent — funds police salaries.

Small wonder that Lancaster Mayor Rick Gray has been among the most persistent advocates of a regionalized approach — backing the idea of a "metropolitan" force, which could provide patrol services for up to 100,000 residents in the central part of the county.

In Columbia, Lutz admits that the borough's decision to seek police "partners" is driven, in part, by economics. "In these times, we as elected officials owe it to our constituents to try and find a lower-cost, better-service method of providing services," he said.

Occasionally, that involves inking a contract with a neighboring municipality. Earlier this year, Lancaster Township ended a 30-year relationship in which Lancaster city police patrolled the township. After city officials hiked the cost beyond what township officials believed they could afford, the deal fell apart. Lancaster Township instead signed a contract with Manheim Township, which will take over policing duties in Lancaster Township Jan. 1.

A similar situation unfolded in Mountville Borough in October, when the borough rejected a new contract with Manor Township, which had policed the borough for 35 years. Instead, Mountville thinks it got a better deal from West Hempfield Township, saving more than \$120,000 over the five-year life of the contract.

"It was not an easy vote," Mountville Borough Council President Paul Chin said. "We appreciate what Manor Township has done.

"But it came down to dollars and cents."

At least five police departments in Lancaster County — East Cocalico, Manheim Township, Ephrata Borough, East Earl Township and Strasburg Borough — provide contracted services to neighboring municipalities. West Hempfield will join that group Jan. 1, when its contract with Mountville goes into effect.

Experts who study municipal policing say contracted services can be the cheapest way for municipalities without their own police force to provide public safety. But should cash-strapped municipalities begin switching police contracts the way consumers do cell-phone plans, it could create instability, said Gerry Cross, an analyst with the Pennsylvania Economy League.

"In a contracted service, you can decide what to buy," Cross said, but it takes time for a police force to get to know a community and police it as effectively as possible. That familiarity is not fostered by switching providers, he said.

But a regional police force can both provide continuity and save money.

A Pennsylvania Economy League study earlier this year found that in Lancaster County, the average per-capita cost in municipalities with stand-alone police departments was \$174.24. In municipalities covered by regional police

Like a lot of people this time of year, Leo Lutz hopes to find a better deal by shopping around.

But unlike the shoppers thronging the malls, Lutz isn't looking for a high-definition TV or a new sweater. Instead, the mayor of Columbia Borough is looking for a "partner" to help the river town provide, and afford, police patrols.

Not that Columbia's 17-officer police department is doing a poor job, said Lutz; far from it. But like many municipalities, Columbia faces a budget crunch. Public safety is by far the biggest expense in the budget, and it's growing.

Earlier this fall, Lutz sent letters to officials in six nearby municipalities, asking if they'd be interested in forming a regional police force, or doing joint purchasing — or anything else. "Everything's on the table at this point," said Lutz. Several municipalities are interested; others are watching closely, for what's happening in Columbia might be the future of policing in Lancaster County itself.

Across Pennsylvania, to an unprecedented extent, local police departments are being combined into larger regional ones to save money and increase efficiency. In York and Berks counties, there's been extensive public discussion of combining police forces. In Berks, one study recommended a single, county-wide police force. In York, a proposed metropolitan force could unify the policing efforts of six separate municipalities in the urban core of the county.

Here, consolidation has not received the same scrutiny. There are already three regional police departments in Lancaster County, and several departments provide contracted services for neighboring municipalities. Earlier this decade, East Hempfield, West Hempfield and Manor townships rejected the idea of regionalization.

But as public finances deteriorate, some local officials expect that municipalities will be forced to consider police regionalization on a far broader scale than anything tried so far.

"I think it's coming," said John May, a Manor Township supervisor.

"But it's going to be painful."

Local control

Few municipalities are eager to cede control of police services. Police forces are among the most identifiable, and most important, of public servants.

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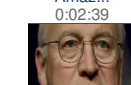
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forces, the average per-capita cost was \$110.65.

Lancaster County has three regional departments: Southern Regional Police serves Conestoga and Pequea townships; Susquehanna Regional patrols Marietta Borough and Conoy and East Donegal townships; and Northwest Lancaster County Regional Police Department covers Mount Joy and West Donegal townships.

In 2001, officials in East Hempfield, West Hempfield and Manor townships considered forming what would have been the county's largest regional police department. But East Hempfield backed out after residents voiced concerns about response times and the cost of a new police headquarters. Manor and West Hempfield continued to study the idea, but ultimately the effort collapsed.

East Hempfield Police Chief Doug Bagnoli still thinks regionalization would have been a good idea.

"It should have been done 20 years ago," said Bagnoli, who supports a single, countywide police force.

"But you'd have to do it for the right reason: to make services better," he said. "If you're doing it only to save money, that might not be enough."

A large regional department could realize efficiencies in purchasing, booking and training. It could allow for a specialization of services, such as forensics, which individual municipal departments couldn't hope to match.

"As soon as we regionalized, each car had a laptop, we had proper weapons in each car," said Chief John Fiorill, of the Southern Regional Police Department, formed in 2003. "Before that, Pequea and Conestoga [police] had enough guys to cover the streets and answer the calls. Now I've got a guy on the county Major Crimes Unit. I have a guy on the forensics team. I have a guy on the Lancaster County Drug Task Force.

"I've formed partnerships with other agencies I would not have been able to do" with a stand-alone municipal force, Fiorill said.

On the other hand, regional police efforts face significant start-up costs, and require a significant amount of upfront capital. Few municipalities have that to spare, though Fiorill said that until the recent budget crunch, state grants were often available.

Pensions can also be an issue; if one department's pensions are underfunded, the new department and its municipal partners would need to make up the shortfall.

Still, Fiorill said, "I'm a big proponent of regionalization. It's a practical way to provide services and eventually keep costs to a minimum. You're going to be able to get a little more out of that [tax] dollar."

The politics

But the politics of full-scale regionalization are perilous.

Chief Keith Sadler, of the Lancaster (city) Bureau of Police, a former division captain with the Philadelphia Police Department, recalls how "the more affluent neighborhoods always accused the police of spending too much time in the areas of high crime, while people in high-crime areas accused the police of spending all their time in the affluent neighborhoods." Under a regional agreement, municipal officials might wonder "if they're getting the right amount of policing they're used to getting," Sadler said. If there are 10 municipalities in a regional department, "You're only getting one-tenth of the authority."

"On paper, it all makes sense," Sadler said. That doesn't mean officials, or citizens, will embrace it.

Regionalization hasn't generated much discussion here, unlike in much of the state. "We're busier than we have been in the past couple of years with requests [from municipalities] looking to regionalize," said Ron Stern, a local-government policy specialist with the Governor's Center for Local Government Services.

James DeBord, of East Hempfield Township, heads YorkCounts, the organization in York County spearheading a drive to create a "Metro-York consolidated police department." (See related story, Page A5.) He spoke to the Lancaster Rotary last week and reported a great deal of interest in his presentation.

But there hasn't been enough interest in the topic to spur serious discussions here. The Lancaster Inter-Municipal Committee represents 11 municipalities in the urban core of the county and was cited by several local leaders as the organization most likely to address the topic of regionalization here. John Ahlfeld, executive director of the Inter-Municipal Committee, said the group would broach the subject if any of its members brought it up.

"But no one has," Ahlfeld said.

Some local officials express a guarded interest in the subject. "It would presumably result in some efficiencies and savings," said Mike Flanagan, public safety commissioner for the Manheim Township Commissioners. But, "there are obviously a host of issues besides the cost savings which would be subject to debate," particularly response times and local control.

Bill Laudien, Lancaster Township manager, said he "fully support[s] the idea of regionalized municipal services where it's mutually beneficial." Indeed, he said, when the township was exploring its policing options, it considered combined coverage from Southern Regional, Manor and East Lampeter township police — in effect, a regional solution.

"Given the fact that we are neighbors with so many different municipalities, we have as much to gain as anyone from the establishment of a regional metropolitan police force," Laudien said.

But necessity, rather than gain, may ultimately drive the debate.

"You're talking about redistributing resources, and the wealthier municipalities are going to be leery about that," said Ed Wilson, of West Hempfield Township, vice president of 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania, a group that has advocated regionalization of police and other municipal services. But many Pennsylvania municipalities are experiencing serious fiscal decline, with cities and larger boroughs facing the toughest challenges. They are likely to lead the push for regionalization.

In the current fiscal environment, where they go, the larger, "wealthier" municipalities are likely to follow.

"People will say, 'Our bill would go up,' but right now, police and fire safety already take up more than half our budget," said John May, Manor Township supervisor.

"We rejected it; East Hempfield rejected it" in the past, he said.

In the future, "We may have no choice."

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Gil Smart is associate editor of the Sunday News. E-mail him at gsmart@lnpnews.com, or phone 291-8817.

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Strasburg Boro only covers Strasburg Boro. They have no contract with Strasburg Twp and have never had a contract with the Twp. Several years ago, the Boro had some preliminary talks with W. Lampeter Twp. but that was all that happened. W. Lampeter Twp didn't want anything to do with a reg. dept. It a shame cause it would make for a nice regional dept. L-S regional PD.

groundpounder

An entity that always seems to be overlooked when speaking about consolidation of services is the public works sector. Police departments are heavy on personnel resources and consolidating normally does not save a lot of money but can increase productivity. Public works are heavy on equipment and machinery and a lot of money can be saved through consolidation. For example, two neighboring townships may both own a large grader that cost about \$100,000.00. The graders are used only several months out of the year. Wouldn't it make more sense for the townships to consolidate their public services, purchase one grader and, with proper planning, use it in both municipalities? There are some serious savings to be had by consolidating public works departments but no one seems to be thinking about this area.

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QUOTE (CV73501 @ Dec 6 2009, 10:04 PM)

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CV -- you are correct when it comes to public works. Surprisingly enough, specialized equipment sharing does occur fairly frequently now. However this form of intergovernmental cooperation often flies under the public radar because, unlike with police & fire protection, fewer egos are involved and it is easier to equably equate cost sharing. This is not to say that there isn't room for a whole lot more cooperation when it comes to public works along with police and fire protection.

oldguy

QUOTE (groundpounder @ Dec 6 2009, 08:05 PM)

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Didn't know that. I moved here 15 years ago and the first place I lived was Strasburg. I don't know why I thought they had twp then, my misunderstanding. I was a bit taken back when I saw Strasburg mentioned in the article, I didn't think it was correct. LS Regional PD would be great idea, West Lampeter, Strasburg Borough and Township.

Maffimuk

We need to start "pooling" school districts as well.

Later...Shawn

Shawn

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