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York approves study of regional police merger

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York, PA - Police departments in York County are more fractured than they need to be, York City Police Capt. Russell Tschopp told York City Council Tuesday night.

That's what led city officials -- with the help of community improvement organization YorkCounts -- to commission a study about the feasibility of a metropolitan York police department.

The study, which was approved by city council Tuesday, will investigate the benefits and drawbacks of a possible interdepartmental merger as well as other ways to make the York City Police Department more efficient, Tschopp said.

Washington D.C.-based Police Executive Research Forum will conduct the study at a cost of \$78,000. Half of that money will be provided by a state grant from the Department of Community and Economic Development. YorkCounts will provide a 50 percent match, said Michael O'Rourke, city business administrator.

The study is expected to take about six months, but people shouldn't expect a merger any time soon, O'Rourke said.

"There's a lot of work, a lot of hurdles to get over," he said. "They'll study all of the organizations to be able to identify where we have an easy mesh and where we have difficulties."

The numerous labor organizations representing city

and suburban police officers could be a problem, O'Rourke said. Each has its own contract, and there are also various pension plans that are governed by different state laws in the city, he said.

For those reasons and others, the study may recommend merging only some of the departments, O'Rourke said.

Dan Fink, communications director for YorkCounts, said existing countywide police programs like the county QRT team and Drug Task Force are examples of the benefits of collaboration. The study will show how to increase that collaboration.

For many of the smaller departments, the biggest difference would come from consolidating office staff, Fink said. That could mean cost savings, he said.

"It's the difference of having a department of a chief and a couple part-time officers as opposed to have a regional department that has full-time people available," Fink said.

Fink acknowledged there are hurdles to a merger, but they are not insurmountable, he said, citing several area fire departments that have merged.

"There are ways to craft a metro police agreement that doesn't put suburban departments on the hook for the city's pension obligation," he said.

York City Police Chief Wes Kahley said Wednesday he's watched state legislators try to establish a state-wide pension plan since he began his career 20 years ago. Since that has been unsuccessful, he said, a solution for merging pension plans could be difficult.

"Generally, I'm for a merger," Kahley said. "When the numbers are hatched out I don't see a great cost

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savings, but a more efficient, responsive department."

Kahley said York County is ahead of surrounding counties when it comes to police departments working together, and he hopes to see that expand.

Spring Garden Township Police Chief George Swartz Jr. said Wednesday he's onboard for the study, but a lot of questions will need to be answered about contracts, pensions and if a merger will help them serve residents.

"There is value in taking a look at how mergers could benefit us," Swartz said. "There have been some very successful initiatives with merging departments, and we're willing to come to the table and assist with the study."

Chief Bryan Rizzo with Northeastern Regional Police -- which covers Mount Wolf, Manchester and East Manchester Township -- said Wednesday he was optimistic about the financial benefits of a merger, but will look for a smooth contract transition once the study is complete.

"I don't know if we'll ever see a full countywide department," he said. "If it helps us work together on some level, that's a true benefit."

Springettsbury Township Chief David Eshbach declined to comment, and West York Acting Police Chief Justin Seibel could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

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