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Considering combinations

With budgets tight, York County townships contemplate saving money by merging safety services

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Townships in York County and elsewhere in the midstate might look increasingly to municipal cooperation to keep taxes in check while maintaining a certain levels of public safety coverage for residents and businesses.

Manchester Township, just north of York, has avoided raising taxes since the mid-1990s. Revenue produced by economic growth has helped to cover public safety costs, said Tim James, assistant township manager.

But the township, like many others, recently found itself facing a decline in economic growth. On top of the slowdown, the township's fire chief, Richard Shank, suddenly resigned last year.

Because of the two developments, officials began cooperation talks with [York Area United Fire and Rescue](#), the state's first regional combined volunteer and professional fire department, to its knowledge. The organization formed from the nearby Springettsbury and Spring Garden townships fire departments.

The department's chief, Robert McCoy, now also serves as Manchester Township's fire chief, the result of a contract between the township and the fire department, James said. The agreement began on a trial basis in September 2010 and was extended through 2011, he said.

Paying a fee of \$4,000 per month for chief services instead of employing its own fire chief saves the township \$45,000 to \$50,000 annually, James said.

Preliminary talks also are under way to potentially merge Manchester Township's fire services with the combined department, James said. The real savings potential would come from sharing equipment purchases with other operations, he said.

York Area United Fire and Rescue has succeeded in creating financial efficiencies through bulk purchases and consolidating redundant services during its first few years in existence, McCoy said. The department began operating as one unit in 2008.

The 2011 budget is 4 percent lower than its actual costs for 2010, and the department has realized a steep decrease in maintenance expenses since the organization's formation, McCoy said. The cost of maintaining firefighting apparatuses, such as fire trucks and pumpers, fell from \$123,405 in 2008 to about \$57,000 in 2010, he said.

Among other moves, the department has removed a ladder truck from service without replacing it because the combined fleet of equipment is enough to cover the merged territory, McCoy said. Replacing the ladder truck would have cost up to \$1 million, he said.

Professional firefighters who were employed by Springettsbury and Spring Garden townships merged their local unions prior to the department forming, McCoy said, and 2011 is the first full year in which both sets of employees are covered by the same contract.

All new professional hires will receive a defined-contribution retirement package under the new contract. That had been the case for Spring Garden Township firefighters, McCoy said.



Firefighter Rich Mellon checks controls on a truck outside of Springetts Fire Company No. 1 Station 89-1. The station, also at top of page, is part of York Area United Fire and Rescue, the state's first merged regional fire department. Photo/The Susquehanna Photographic

But Springettsbury Township's fire services had received defined-benefits packages, McCoy said, in which they were entitled to a certain benefit level regardless of how investments meant to grow their retirement packages performed. Existing union employees from Springettsbury retain their prior benefits, he said.

In addition to the unions and the fire services themselves, the department also has worked to merge the existing fire police groups and fire relief associations, which provide fundraising capabilities.

Fire police have merged, but the department is still working on the relief associations.

Being the first to begin such a merger in Pennsylvania has created challenges, including trying to figure out whether donation checks can be directed to the merged department instead of the member townships, he said.

"We are still learning to this day," McCoy said.

York County already has several police departments that cover multiple municipalities, including the [Northern York County Regional Police Department](#) that counts Manchester Township as a member.

But at least one group would like to see consolidation be considered further and possibly include York city.

For the past few years, York County quality-of-life proponent group [YorkCounts](#) has been assembling funding and participants in a study to see whether a combined police organization for the metropolitan York area would make sense, YorkCounts communications director Dan Fink said.

The study was almost scuttled when funding dried up from the [Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development](#), Fink said.

But backers requested money from community groups throughout 2010, as well as banks and convenience store chains, to make up the difference, he said. The study will be performed by the [Police Executive Research Forum](#) and take about six months.

Although the primary objective will be to determine whether police consolidation can allocate existing resources more efficiently, budget crunches by governments in Pennsylvania and interests in cost savings might help bring more interested parties to the table, Fink said.

Combined police departments could cut redundant chief positions and other administrative staff, streamlining operations.

"This will bring specific data into the conversation," Fink said.

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