

Two Towns Consider Shared Police Duty

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SWEDESBORO -- Officials from Swedesboro and Woolwich say they are considering sharing their towns' police services in an effort to save tax dollars.

A feasibility study on the plan is to be completed at the end of the month, said Swedesboro Mayor Tom Fromm and Woolwich Deputy Mayor Jim Lavender. They declined to disclose financial or personnel details pending that study's release.

"There will be no shared service agreement for police services that doesn't include improved public safety for our residents at a significantly reduced cost," Fromm said in an e-mail. "The borough will remain safe regardless of the direction we end up going in."

Lavender said an agreement is expected to reduce the number of positions between the two police departments, through attrition, retirement or reassignment -- not layoffs.

Eight full-time and three part-time officers patrol Swedesboro, said Police Chief William Dupper. The borough occupies only eight-tenths of a square mile and is encircled by Woolwich, which covers more than 21 square miles.

Longtime Swedesboro resident Barbara Price said she fears shared services would dissolve the personal touch provided by the borough's officers.

As of Thursday, the 40-year-old is one of dozens of people who are part of a Facebook group called, "Save the Swedesboro Police Department."

Creator of the group and former longtime borough resident, Lesley Plasket, said her main concern was whether Woolwich can handle covering both municipalities and responding to calls promptly.

According to the most recent FBI Uniform Crime Reports, there were five incidents of violent crime reported in Swedesboro in 2007 and six incidents of violent crime in Woolwich that year. Swedesboro has 2,073 residents, compared to 8,390 in Woolwich, according to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau estimate.

Woolwich police Chief Russell H. Marino could not be reached for comment.

Fromm said he and other officials in Swedesboro aren't happy with the possibility of eliminating a "dedicated and independent police force" in the borough.

"Given the current state of our police force, the changing demographics in the Swedesboro-Woolwich community and of course the financial crisis we are all experiencing, we have to be willing to discuss and evaluate all options available to us," he said.

Police shared services work but can come with risks, according to officials in some local municipalities where agreements have recently been implemented.

Woodlynne Mayor Jeraldo Fuentes has said police coverage in the quarter-square-mile borough has improved since Collingswood's police department took over patrolling there two and a half years ago. Fuentes said, however, the savings haven't been what he expected.

National Park Mayor Patricia Koloski said the borough's budget and its law enforcement equipment and training has improved since the police merger with Westville about six months ago.

National Park's six-member force used to cost about \$670,000 to operate. The borough now pays Westville around \$530,000 and has access to a detective bureau.

The state Department of Community Affairs encourages municipalities to share services whenever possible, spokesman Chris Donnelly said, noting they must be examined on a case-by-case basis to determine if they're feasible.

Donnelly said municipalities considering mergers should take advantage of state grants that help pay for studies and implementation costs.

Lavender said Woolwich and Swedesboro officials are working toward earning such grants.

The DCA has awarded study grants to 15 municipalities, according to documents released by Donnelly. In February, it granted Bordentown Township \$33,000 to consider a police consolidation with Bordentown City. It gave similar grants to North Hanover and Springfield, who are also studying possible consolidation.

Meanwhile, Mount Holly and Hainesport are awaiting state action on their applications for grants, submitted last fall. Other municipalities considering police department mergers are Palmyra and Riverton.

A professional shared service study is also under way in Medford Lakes, after the township rejected last month Medford Township's offer to take over its police coverage for \$200,000.

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