

Looking at the Pros and Cons

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BORDENTOWN -- Keep them separate or merge them?

Over a period of a year or longer, a state-funded study will explore the pros and cons of merging the police departments in Bordentown City and Bordentown Township.

The study, which will examine every aspect of operations at both departments to determine the feasibility of uniting them into a single organization, is funded by a \$33,000 grant from the state Department of Community Affairs as part of its Sharing Available Resources Efficiently program.

"It's a rather systematic look at the way the whole process and components of it actually fit together," said township Business Administrator Leonard Klepner.

Patriot Consulting, a Neptune-based firm, will perform the study, which consists of an investigation period followed by an analysis and a formal report, which then will be reviewed. The entire process can take a year or more to complete, Klepner said.

Klepner said the funding for the study was available because of an interlocal agreement between the city and township.

"Under the agreement, the township is the lead agency," Klepner said. "It is responsible for the execution of all the documents."

However, all discussions with the consulting group will require the presence of both city and township officials.

Though the city agreed to the study, City Commissioner James Lynch said he doesn't believe the outcome will indicate a merger as the best course of action.

"Actually, I don't agree with merging the police departments, but I need to at least look at it," Lynch said. "So at least I can say we will look at it and we can make our decisions based on what we feel is right for the community."

Lynch said there may be too many disparities between the departments for a merger to be feasible. One example: the way each department handles police dispatches.

"[The city] switched over to Central Communications about 12 years ago and that saved the city about \$125,000 a year. The township has its own dispatch system. If you merge to two police departments, what happens to the equipment and personnel? We're not going to go backwards," Lynch said.

Township Mayor William Morelli said the township Police Department's "excellent" response times are, in fact, due in part to the fact that it has its own dispatchers.

"I believe [the study] will probably show there is an economy of scale to be gained by merging the police departments. I believe that if it's done properly, it will show there will be no diminishing of response times in the city or township," Morelli said. "I believe we're being proactive here. We're trying to keep ahead of the state's curve of mandating this kind of thing."

Klepner said the numerous differences in the two departments are precisely the reason for the study.

"If you go through this whole process, I think that's really what you would rely on to determine the degree to which something like this is feasible," he said. "They may look at everything and decide that [a merger] is not necessarily the best way to go ahead."

The city and township already share court services and officially entered into a shared services agreement for ambulance services in early March, though the municipalities unofficially had been sharing the services since July 2007.

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