

Shared Police Moves Ahead

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SWEDESBORO -- A little more than a week after holding a joint public forum addressing a potential shared service agreement with Woolwich Township to have the borough outsource its police coverage, an ordinance disbanding the town's police department was introduced before council here Monday night.

The additional approval of a resolution entering into an interlocal agreement last night means Woolwich Police could be on the streets enforcing the law as soon as the end of the month.

"I'm really confident this is the right thing to do," Swedesboro Mayor Tom Fromm said.

Though the interlocal agreements have been signed by both towns, Fromm noted it's not a done-deal just yet. There still has to be another public hearing May 18 on the ordinance to dissolve the borough's force.

"Every member of council has the same feeling that this is not something we wanted to do but it's something we have to do," Swedesboro Councilman Sam Casella said. "This is not dissolving Swedesboro. It's not getting rid of Swedesboro."

The towns agreed April 24 to enter into contract negotiations for five years of the shared service. Previous talks had called for a three-year term.

"After the meeting we went right into negotiations," Fromm said. "There's nothing exotic about this we came up with what I think is an excellent agreement and is really good for both towns."

Under the proposed agreement, Woolwich would begin to patrol Swedesboro beginning midnight June 1 at a prorated rate of \$262,000 for the last half of 2009 with the initial contract expiring December 31 of 2014.

The first full year, the borough would pay Woolwich \$477,000 for coverage with a six percent increase each following year.

Officials believe the interlocal agreement will save dollars in both communities dollars. They estimate taxpayers could save \$380 annually if Woolwich were to pick up the extra police work. Woolwich taxpayers would save about \$68.

Woolwich Deputy Mayor Jim Lavender, who helped head up a study to share services said the police in his township are ready to hit the streets officially in Swedesboro. Though a financial benefit for both towns is a nice benefit, the opportunity to increase safety is what helped drive the concept forward.

"The tax savings is one thing," Lavender said. "Most importantly we're looking at an opportunity to provide better services by the elimination of the jurisdictional boundaries that currently exist."

Casella echoed Lavender's sentiments, stating despite the quality and dedication of the borough's police, the current force can't do any more than they already do right now.

"We get a better presence in the borough," Casella said. "We feel it'll eliminate a lot of issues speeding and hot spots with drug activity."

The councilman noted the utilization of Woolwich's detective division would benefit the residents of the borough. Often the officer who takes an initial complaint in Swedesboro ultimately ends up running the investigation.

To handle the extra patrol area that the borough presents to Woolwich, two full-time officers and one part-time officer would have to be hired to the township's force. It's not a sure thing Swedesboro officers would be added to the ranks.

If and when the police force is ultimately disbanded, it will leave several officers out of work. Officials said the current staff have been given means to pursue other avenues of employment.

They've been instructed how to sign up for public civil service employment. Casella said legislation is in the works to potentially assign the officers with the county Sheriff's Department.

The plan to deal with shared services received approval from the state's Department of Community Affairs. Consolidation and saving by sharing has been the group's policy for sometime. Several police departments locally have entered into similar agreements.

At the hearing held late last month, residents spoke out to keep the current department intact. They also worried that a situation could arise between the borough and the township that occurred in Woodlynne and Collingswood in Camden County.

There, an agreement to share a police department is fizzling before its contract expires, potentially leaving Woodlynne without safety coverage.

To address that situation, a clause in the interlocal agreement is included that requires a one-year notice to terminate the agreement.

"Swedesboro doesn't want to be exposed and we don't want to put them in that situation," Lavender said. "This protects both sides."

The hearing on the dissolving of the police department will be held March 18 at 7 p.m. at the Margaret Clifford School on Auburn Road.

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