

Officials: Joint Police Force a 'No-Brainer'

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SWEDESBORO -- Officials in Woolwich and Swedesboro said they could start sharing police services by June, creating a larger police department out of Woolwich that would save taxpayers money and offer better services.

The deal, planned to be in place until the 2012 budget year, would save taxpayers in both towns a combined \$2.64 million, improve police coverage and resources and allow for technology and equipment upgrades, according to a joint-investigation study published on both municipalities' Web sites. It would also eliminate the Swedesboro police department and cut a handful of law enforcement jobs, according to that feasibility study.

After a public hearing on Thursday night, the Swedesboro council and Woolwich committee have been authorized to negotiate toward an agreement based on the study.

"We are comfortable and so are the police departments," said Woolwich deputy mayor Jim Lavender who presented the study. "We're convinced it will improve conditions. It's no different than us sharing the fire company and school districts."

Swedesboro Mayor Tom Fromm said he's proud of the report, which shows the consolidation is a "no brainer." "In our case it's providing the best protection and economics," he said. "The vast majority of people in Swedesboro, once they understand, will be behind this idea."

The municipalities share in a dozen services, including Kingsway Regional High School District, the Swedesboro-Woolwich Elementary School District, Locke Avenue Park and community recreation leagues.

The study estimates that shared police services would decrease the property tax in Swedesboro by nearly 42 cents to \$1.004 per \$100 in assessed value, saving a taxpayer with a property assessed at the \$91,552 borough average about \$380 per year. It estimates that in Woolwich, the tax rate would be reduced by nearly 4 cents to about 57 cents per \$100 in assessed value, saving a taxpayer with a property assessed at the \$183,438 township average about \$68 per year.

Some residents said that those would be timely savings.

Jeffery Thomas, a Woolwich resident of eight years, said he likes the potential savings, and the deal makes sense because of the relatively small sizes of both towns.

Monica Stevens, a mother with three children in the school district, said she's for the agreement that would save her money. Stevens, a Woolwich resident of seven years, said the shared school district has been "so far, so good."

Still, officials in both towns said they are aware there may continue to be strong resistance to a shared police service agreement by some Swedesboro residents.

Members of "Save the Swedesboro Police Department," a Facebook group with more than 50 members, have said a shared-service agreement raises concerns as to whether Woolwich Police can cover both municipalities and promptly respond to calls and that an agreement would dissolve the personal touch provided by Swedesboro officers.

Stephen Spithar, a Swedesboro resident of 38 years, said Woolwich won't be able to cover both towns and he wants his local police department.

"I would give them my \$380 (in potential property tax savings) to keep the department," he said.

If both sides reach an agreement, according to the study, Woolwich's contracted police department would include 23 employees, five more than currently cover the township's more than 21 square miles. Swedesboro has eight full-time and three part-time officers to patrol the borough's eight-tenths of a square mile that is encircled by Woolwich.

Lavender said Woolwich Police, if contracted, would hire two full-time and three part-time employees, which "may or may not" come from Swedesboro's eliminated department. He said officials are working with other area departments to find homes for officers who may be cut, in order to "make sure no one is hurt."

Swedesboro Police Chief William Dupper and Woolwich Police Chief Russell Marino declined comment about the negotiations.

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.

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.

There are at least seven shared police service agreements statewide, according to the DCA. The DCA has awarded feasibility study grants to 16 municipalities, Donnelly said.

Recently, the DCA awarded a \$31,500 grant to Mount Holly to study shared police services with Hainesport Township. In February, it granted Bordentown Township \$33,000 to consider a police consolidation with Bordentown City and gave similar grants to North Hanover and Springfield, which are also studying consolidation.

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