

SPECIAL MEETING OF THE WEST AMWELL TOWNSHIP COMMITTEE AND
THE GOVERNING BODIES OF EAST AMWELL AND LAMBERTVILLE TO HEAR
A PUBLIC PRESENTATION ON THE BLUE SHIELD CONSULTING FEASIBILITY
STUDY FOR POLICE SHARED SERVICES

JANUARY 25, 2010 – 7 p.m.
East Amwell Township municipal building.

The meeting opened with statements of compliance with the Open Public Meetings Act read into the record for the attending municipal bodies. Mayor Kneskie of East Amwell extended a welcome to all in attendance, including the members of the three governing bodies, Hunterdon County Chamber of Commerce president Chris Phelan, shared services coordinator Michael Capabiano and Ted Ehrenburg of Blue Shield Consulting.

The meeting was recorded via digital recording system and a copy of the CD is on file in the Office of the Municipal Clerk.

Mr. Capabianco overviewed the history of this proposed shared police initiative that began in 2007 and the qualifications of the people involved in coordinating the project. The purpose of a police merger is to minimize future costs while maintaining the same level of service in a system that would be fair to all parties. The three town study is available on the Chamber's website and comments can be posted.

Mr. Ehrenburg offered that the study was contracted to determine feasibility for a south county force. He noted that:

- 2010 will be a very tough budget season
- State aid could be "0"
- A shared service is the only way to cut operating costs without cutting services
- Municipalities need to cap or limit costs
- The study has no real initial savings or staff cuts as current levels are on the edge of where they need to be
- The study does address training, staffing and shift issues
- Once the merged force is in place, services can be offered to another municipality
- The responsibility of police is to protect the public
- State Police coverage may not be free forever
- The bottom line is size vs cost
- Retirements are looming and changes will have to be made
- 5.2 cops are needed to run a 24 hr operation
- A municipal cost split would have to be made on the basis of percentage of calls
- Governance of the new entity would have to be fair and equitable to all
- The process would involve dissolving the two current police departments, setting up a merged department with a governing entity, establish new contracts, institute 12 hour shifts to benefit health, morale and family

Emphasis was placed on forward thinking and being prepared, with work flow staffing the way to go as it's a different world and leaders need to be prepared for what's coming. The overarching purpose is protection and safety: job #1. Specific details would be worked out during the implementation stage.

The meeting was opened for public comment/questions. Although there was some support for looking into this concept more fully, this was the exception rather than the rule. Examples of issues/questions raised and responses are as follows:

- why fix something that's not broken
- no need for municipal police; state has too much government (State Police required to provide service, for now, but charter can be changed and after 911 their directive is part of homeland security)
- get a proposal from the County Sheriff's dept (Freeholders won't sign off on County police dept due to politics and cost)
- contrast between police services and State Police (State Police not patrolling; new model would provide full coverage)

- concern over growth of police dept vs growth of budgets
- why other municipalities were not included (they elected not to participate)
- differences in call volume between the two departments and lack of benefit; need for greater services may not happen (police would go where needed)
- a projection of costs was not provided (based on current conditions)
- issue of police practices between the two entities; density differences (style will change to meet needs and practices tempered to best serve expectations)
- State police charter issues and that their charter is not law
- how the governance of the new entity would be set up—population, number of call, etc. (decided by township officials; must be fair and equitable; spelled out in a legal document)
- a shared service would get West Amwell another officer or two as it's now 1 cop-1 car-1 gun (retirements are looming; supervision, overtime, officer safety and insurance are considerations)
- don't need a combined force to effect mutual aid; two officers never on any shift in another 1 sq. mile municipality (issues arise when an officer is tied up and cannot provide backup; different world, must be prepared)
- whether the people would get to vote on a merger or if it would be a decision by the governing bodies involved (the study is a recommendation only)
- why State and County police records were not included in the study as they are readily available, if asked (not available; mutual aid also extends into Mercer County)
- who governs and where the entity would be located (new entity; Lambertville as no room in West Amwell)
- is there an exit strategy if this doesn't work (no going back; both departments would be disbanded)
- concern over current officer service time and pensions; also revenue to the court (revenue stays in municipality where summons issued; no loss of service time if already in pension system; name change only; nothing lost)
- effect on officer salaries (take care of employees; the consolidation would weave departments together)
- what obligation is there to continue the process; no savings is realized but an empire built (information session only; no obligation to continue; process takes time and no decision can be made in one night)
- would each municipality hold the same liability as there is more crime in Lambertville (would depend on how costs are assigned; the JIFs pool all municipal risks)
- the three municipalities should pressure the Freeholders as there would be efficiency with the use of the Sheriff's office; a sheriff is elected every three years, an option not available with a chief
- kids and police invoke emotions; commendation given to officials for doing due diligence; changing times cannot be ignored
- the study has glaring omissions, e.g., more than one State highway involved; the study took years to arrive at this public forum; should be correct with all information obtained (post comments to the forum on the website)
- shared services are supposed to save money and is not a new concept; what would the cost be if a merger happened (depends on implementation; two-part study)
- was the court part of the study; a similar alignment of twp/twp vs twp/city (no, but courts could merge; East Amwell already has a joint court)

Larry Tatsch of East Amwell provided an overview of the situation that East Amwell faced in 2007 when the State threatened to eliminate services to rural communities unless there was a payment of \$600,000. This was taken up with the Council on State mandates and the affected towns prevailed. Since that time, the township committee has been looking at options such as contracted services with other municipalities. It was also deemed prudent to investigate the option presented tonight but there is no obligation attached. Nothing will change as long as the State Police continue to be a presence but options are needed for the future in case that changes. Also there will be no contract with a joint force unless it is working well.

Dave DelVecchio extended appreciation to the Chamber for bringing this forum together.

George Fisher of West Amwell offered that this is a first step and nothing will happen until more details are available to determine if the plan moves forward. There is resistance in the township and financial feasibility has to be looked at. An increased number of participating municipalities would be better. More information is needed before a decision can be made.

Tom Molnar offered that he's not hearing a lot of support for the study and that there are unanswered questions and inaccuracies in the report. He does not favor a merger.

The meeting concluded with Mr. Capabianco inviting the public to read the study; post comments on the shared services website; and, talk to their officials, noting that government is a slow process and there will be more meetings. He is available to answer questions and can be reached at the Chamber.

Respectfully submitted,

Lora L. Olsen, RMC