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Keeping an eye on police regionalization

By Colin McNickle

Cheswick Borough and Springdale Township have joined forces to form Allegheny County’s second regional police force.

And if the conclusions of a state study that led to the creation of the Allegheny Valley Regional Police Department come to fruition, it could be an operational and financial win-win for local taxpayers, finds an analysis by the Allegheny Institute for Public Policy.

“Although intergovernmental cooperation can be complicated, the study indicated that, in this case, the benefits outweighed the challenges,” say Eric Montarti, research director of the Pittsburgh think tank, and Hannah Bowser, a research assistant there (in *Policy Brief Vol. 19, No. 32*).

Article IX, Section 5, of the Pennsylvania Constitution allows for such consolidations. It was in the 1960s that Allegheny County’s first consolidation came with creation of the Northern Regional Police Department, combining departments in Pine, Marshall and Bradford Woods. Richland joined the group in 2006.

Statewide, 122 municipalities are part of regional police forces.

An October 2018 study by the Governor’s Center for Local Government Services (LGS) recommended the Cheswick/Springdale merger.

Among the regional policing benefits noted by the study are improvement in uniformity and enforcement; coordination of law-enforcement services; recruitment; distribution and deployment of police personnel; training and personnel efficiency; management and supervision; career enhancement opportunities and reduced costs.

But the study did not shy away from potential disadvantages. Among them are loss of local services, control, citizen contact and personnel rank.

According to a 2014 report by the Pennsylvania Legislative Budget and Finance Committee, loss of municipal control was the main obstacle identified in forming regional police departments. Labor issues were close behind.

Cheswick and Springdale officials agreed to consolidate their police forces in April, effective July 1. Cheswick's annual police costs were \$324,945 while Springdale's were \$373,364 for a total of \$698,309.

But the combined force – with a police chief, two full-time officers and four part-timers – was projected to cost \$499,998 annually. That represents a nearly 28.4 percent savings off the combined costs of running separate forces.

The actual budget and staffing ended up close to the projections: \$449,839 with a police chief, a patrol officer and six part-time officers. That's a nearly 35.6 percent drop from the communities' prior combined policing costs. Cheswick and Springdale are splitting the cost 50-50.

The state Budget and Finance Committee's report found that a sample of regional police departments cost approximately 25 percent less than stand-alone departments, though some had increased costs in initial years after formation.

Another consolidation of the Mon Valley's Braddock, North Braddock, Rankin, East Pittsburgh and Whittaker police forces is being studied.

That said, not all considered police force consolidations go forward. To wit, a proposed regional force combining Sharpsburg, Aspinwall, O'Hara and Blawnox was not recommended because it would have resulted in higher costs.

“As such, residents of Cheswick and Springdale Township ought to keep a vigilant eye to see if the savings materialize and ultimately translate into lower taxes,” Montarti and Bowser say. “As the department continues in operation, it will be interesting to see if and how much the benefits pan out.”

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