Officers like regional department

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By Christina Kristofic Staff Writer |

Most police officers in Doylestown, Doylestown Township, New Britain and Warwick want to be part of a regional police department.

At about 1 a.m. on Jan. 1, Doylestown police Sgt. Lance Carlen stopped a vehicle because the first two numbers of the license plate were covered up and discovered that the driver was carrying a handgun without a permit.

Carlen arrested the man on a weapons charge.

Carlen then spent the next 11 hours driving the man all over Bucks County: to the Bucks County Men’s Center for fingerprinting, to the Doylestown Township Police Department for video arraignment and then to Warminster for booking. He had problems with Doylestown Township’s video equipment and Warminster’s computers and fax machine. Carlen finally got his detainee arraigned at 6 a.m. and finished processing all of the paperwork at noon.

“That’s what a pain in the neck with the way we’re doing things with a small department,” Carlen said.

“All that time we’re spending transporting the guy around is time we can’t be patrolling.”

If Doylestown becomes part of a regional police department, Carlen said, the state would allow the regional department to have the equipment to do fingerprinting, bookings and video arraignments.

Carlen, the president of the Doylestown Borough Police Association, said most of the borough’s police officers want Doylestown to form a regional police department with Doylestown Township, New Britain and Warwick.

Many police officers in the other municipalities feel the same way. They see regionalization as an opportunity to make their investigations more efficient.

Police union leaders cited the recent spate of burglaries in the area as an example: There have been burglaries in Doylestown, Doylestown Township and Warwick. Each police department has an officer assigned to the investigations. And each officer is probably looking for the same person. Doylestown Township police Detective Matt O’Connor said: “I’m sure the criminals that are hitting Doylestown Township are hitting Doylestown and Warwick Township. Warwick kids don’t just do Warwick crimes. It’s the same with Doylestown; Doylestown kids don’t just do Doylestown crimes.”

If the area had a regional police department, only one officer would be assigned to investigate the burglaries, and the other two officers could spend more time on other investigations.

Police officers could also have the opportunity to specialize in the areas of investigation that interest them, said O’Connor, president of the Doylestown Township Police Benevolent Association. The small individual departments cannot afford special investigative units, the officers said, but a regional department could have a traffic safety unit or a K-9 unit or a cyber-crimes unit.

The officers also say regionalization would give them more opportunities to move through the ranks.

“Two of us just got promoted to sergeant and one just got promoted to corporal. We’re gonna be here 13 or more years,” Carlen said. “When you have a large department, you have more supervisory opportunities.”

Warwick police Sgt. Richard Vona, the president of the Warwick Police Benevolent Association, said he knows municipal officials - especially those in his municipality - have a lot of questions. And he understands that.
"It's obviously something that needs to be questioned. But the answers are there," he said. "It seems like we have a lot of questions and nobody's trying to really answer them."

The Warwick supervisors - and at least one resident - have publicly expressed concern about losing local police officers and having to deal with officers they don't know. Vona said that's not something they should worry about: "The people who are looking at this are all extremely professional, well educated individuals. Common sense would dictate that if regionalization starts tomorrow, you're not going to take all the Warwick officers and put them in Doylestown. You're going to have Warwick officers in Warwick. The only thing that's going to change is the color on the car and the color on the uniform."

The four police departments have a total of 60 police officers. A recent study done by the state Department of Community and Economic Development recommends that a regional department made of the four municipalities have 55 officers. The local police union leaders are sure they can become part of a regional department without layoffs; Warwick police Chief Joe Costello is expected to retire this year, Doylestown Township Police Chief Stephen White is expected to retire next year and other officers in the departments are also getting close to retirement.

The police union leaders don't believe it will be difficult to negotiate a fair labor contract, either.

"I don't agree that the contract is necessarily going to be the 'best of the best of the best,'" Vona said, quoting a warning Warwick Supervisor Chairwoman Judith Algeo gave residents Tuesday. "Part of the savings Warwick is going to be realizing is a change in our health care plan - a change to a more mainstream health care program. We're fully willing to sit down with the commission as it's formed and negotiate a contract that's fair to everyone."

Carlen said some of the Doylestown police officers have reservations about joining a regional department.

"A lot of our guys are happy with Doylestown Borough," Carlen said. "They're very good to us as a union and police department. Nobody's losing their jobs. They treat us well. There's no animosity between the borough and the officers. I think the guys are worried that's what we're going to lose in regionalization."

But Carlen thinks the other officers' worries could be overcome. The Doylestown officers already know the officers in the other municipalities and work with them on a limited basis. He said: "I can't see why it wouldn't work well."

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