

Countywide Law Enforcement Study

March 10, 2009

Fleetwood High School Auditorium

Call To Order 6:30 PM

Commissioner Chair Mark C. Scott, Esq. called the meeting to order with Commissioner Christian Leinbach and Commissioner Kevin Barnhardt in attendance along with approximately 50 citizens, municipal officials and county wide law enforcement professionals. The Commissioner said that the County's active interest in looking at police services on a county wide basis began in 2003. He explained that several meetings were held with various police consulting groups, including Giuliani Associates in New York City. A prior board of County Commissioners convened a Police Study Task Force consisting of elected officials and police professionals from Berks County. He said that the result of that task force was to recommend awarding a consulting contract with the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) to conduct a study of all police services in Berks County. The objective of the study was to develop recommendations for possible cost saving options and ideas to provide improved and more efficient police services on a more regional and cooperative basis. He then recognized that many cooperative efforts in the County have already proven successful such as the County's Central Processing Unit; the provision of 200 laptop computers to municipal police departments for better communication; the County sponsored Graffiti Abatement Program, the cooperation of the District Attorney and his staff of County Detectives and the new Berks County Emergency Response Team (BCERT). He said that the Commissioners have not approached this study with any forgone conclusions – "everything is on the table."

Commissioner Leinbach then gave credit to the prior board of Commissioners for allowing the incoming board time to review and approve this study contract and importantly it enabled the City to be a participating member. He also credited Commissioner Barnhardt for taking the lead and acquiring funding from the PA DCED to offset the costs of this study.

Commissioner Barnhardt welcomed everyone and announced that an e-mail address has been established by the county for those who are unable to attend the two public meetings to submit comments regarding police services (policestudy@countyofberks.com.) He said that this e-mail address will be accessible until the end of March.

Commissioner Scott then introduced Police Executive Research Forum representative, Bill Tegler who provided a brief background on his organization and what has been accomplished thus far in this study project. He said that PERF is a national membership organization of police professionals dedicated to improving policing and advancing professionalism through research and involvement in public policing studies such as this one. He briefly described the process to date which he said has involved 25 different police jurisdictions in the county. He said that when all the surveys from those departments have been returned, PERF will be compiling an inventory of law enforcement resources, facilities, reviewing existing collective bargaining contracts, pension benefits and all aspects of police administration in these municipalities. He said they will be making an attempt to learn what is working and not working, review charters, agreements and all other legal arrangements including labor agreements and existing cost studies; they will be looking at workloads, dispatch records, and evaluate number of police calls and time consumed by patrol officers and response times; they will look at officer standby or back up standards within the departments; evaluate crimes locations and economic conditions / property values of neighborhoods.

With all the survey results in, they will perform an evaluation of the existing administrative support services provided for existing police agencies and make a comparison for the consolidation of the same, with the ultimate goal of creating a template for what a single county or several regional agencies may look like. He said this template could possibly provide the information that the State Legislature could use should they consider changing the law to allow a County Wide Police agency at some point. He expected those results by the middle of April. He then said that the purpose tonight was to gather the citizen's thoughts comments, concerns and ideas.

The following summarizes the comments expressed by the following individuals:

Ronald Seaman, South Heidelberg Township

Roger Feeg, Robeson Township

Pete Murkle, Fleetwood Borough

Gene Waltz, Shillington Borough

Joe Kuzmann, Fleetwood Borough

Earl Fox, Fleetwood Borough

Michelle Kircher, Exeter Township

Bill Collins, Spring Township

Advantages:

- The general consensus from the group seemed to be that regionalization would allow police departments to provide more specialized services and better protection to their community.
- A larger department would allow more advancement opportunities for Police Officers.
- This could help small towns who are facing large town problems and are not properly equipped to deal with them – gang related incidents was cited as an example

Disadvantages, concerns and questions:

- Larger is not necessarily better.
- Some municipal officials have experienced regionalization attempts that ultimately have failed.
- Police Officers need to be familiar with neighborhoods and citizens, that familiarity can be lost in larger police departments
- How to fairly appropriate the cost of regionalized departments when many times the larger municipalities and especially the City of Reading end up being the driver of the cost
- Will any new salary and benefit plans have to match the salaries of the existing larger departments
- How would you entice municipalities who currently have only State Police coverage to join and provide funding for their share
- How will each participating municipality have a voice in the operation of the resulting department
- Response time to rural areas will be a big issue
- It was suggested that additional meetings be established once the results of the study and recommendations are complete

The Commissioners then provided their ending comments.

Commissioner Leinbach said that he views two main points as being the critical determining factors for this concept to succeed, and that is improved response time and reduced cost.

Commissioner Barnhardt said that this is only the 1st step in a long process. He said that the PA Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) funding 50% of the cost of the study and has been very supportive towards the county's efforts. He said he believed that that sentiment will continue perhaps in the form of additional funding to offset any start up costs.

Commissioner Scott said that this project will have to be driven from the bottom up, the county has no interest in forcing it. He said that the taxpayers will have to see the benefits and support the legislation to allow this change to be considered. He said he would hope that the efficiencies of this system would sell itself.

There being no additional comments, the meeting adjourned at 7:50 PM

Respectfully submitted,

Terry L. Styer
Chief Clerk

March 12, 2009

Berks County Services Center Auditorium Call To Order 6:30 PM

Commissioner Chair Mark C. Scott, Esq. called the meeting to order with Commissioner Christian Leinbach and Commissioner Kevin Barnhardt in attendance along with approximately 50 citizens, municipal officials and countywide law enforcement professionals. Commissioner Leinbach encouraged everyone to use this opportunity as a forum to get thoughts and concerns on the table. Commissioner Barnhardt said he was pleased that of the 44 police agencies that were contacted for participation in this policing resources survey, only three declined.

The Commissioners provided background information to this group similar to the meeting in Fleetwood (see March 10 minutes above)

PERF Representative Bill Tegler described the focus group meeting he conducted this afternoon and he commended the Commissioners for pulling together a good group of people representing various organizations who regularly interact with Police Agencies to gather their view of current police services and possible improvements.

The following summarizes the comments expressed by the following individuals:

Ernest Schlegel, Reading resident
John K. Reber, Chief Womelsdorf Police Department
Jeff Biehl, Wyomissing Police Department
Harold Jackson, Manager Kenhorst Borough
Chris Neidert, Chief Exeter Police Department
Bill Heim, Chief Reading Police Department
John Adams, District Attorney
Eric Weaknecht, Sheriff
Lou Gable, Caernarvon Township Supervisor
John Kramer, Center for Community Leadership

Advantages:

Support for regionalization was frequently expressed and a suggestion that the Berks County Sheriff's Department being given full police authority to participate.

Economy of scale savings – larger departments can realize more efficiencies, provide more specialization of services, and quicker emergency response time;

For those municipalities that have no police coverage who may ultimately be invoiced for State Police Coverage (as proposed in Governor Rendell's budget message) this could prove to be an advantage by keeping their funds local;

Disadvantages:

Obtaining legislation to move forward with a Countywide Police Force would be a huge hurdle that could be avoided by moving towards consolidation and regionalization of existing departments;

Change is too difficult in the minds of citizens;

People don't think of themselves as Berks County residents and therefore don't want to consider supporting a project that will benefit citizens outside of their local municipal borders

The Commissioners indicated that regionalization may not show a cost savings initially and even long term it may not prove to be more cost effective, but they pointed to efforts of cooperative projects that are a direct result of existing police cooperation that this study will be able to build on.

Commissioner Scott said that politics is often a big factor in local police enforcement particularly in the smaller communities with less sophisticated departments, therefore the goal here is to have a "depoliticized" professional police force going forward and he used the County District Attorney and Sheriff as the rare examples of those independently elected officials who run a "tight ship" with very little politics involved.

There being no additional comments, the meeting adjourned at 8:00 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Terry L. Styer
Chief Clerk