

M-COG chief hopes to revive regional police effort in area

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No one in the area is talking about a regional police force, an idea that merited a great deal of interest at the beginning of the decade. That interest waned and communities pulled out of the group, citing financial limitations and potential tax hikes.

But Dan Gydish, who recently took over as head of the Mountain Council of Governments, hopes to revive the effort this year.



Gydish

That's because the state has been looking favorably on multi-government projects and granting them aid before applications from solitary municipalities, he said.

"I think regionalization in anything is the way to go," Gydish said. "There's so much money you can save. I hope to make that one of the projects I revisit this year. Maybe we could rekindle a spark."

Eight communities expressed an interest in a proposed regional force in 2000. They included Beaver Meadows, Butler Township, Conyngham, Freeland, Hazleton, Hazle Township, Sugarloaf Township and West Hazleton.

Within two years, only Butler, Hazle and Hazleton remained.

Hazleton Police Chief Robert Ferdinand said he hasn't heard anything more than rumors lately regarding a regional force.

And neither the chief nor Mayor Lou Barletta has had other communities contact them regarding a regional force or contracting with the city for police services, a move that one area community has taken this year.

Regional police

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Dennison Township contracted with White Haven for police services.

Dennison pays \$1,250 a month for 40 hours of police coverage from the borough's force.

Both communities and Penn Lake Borough studied a regional force, but the plan came to an end when Penn Lake found it couldn't afford its share of the cost.

However, Dennison and White Haven reached an agreement between them.

Ferdinand said he heard talk of West Hazleton looking to the city for police protection, but so far, it's just talk.

West Hazleton Mayor Mark Rockovich explained that it's too early to talk about regionalization, which may be more expensive for the borough than bringing back its own force.

The main talks, he said, will be with the borough's laid-off officers to see if they want to come back and then, if the borough can afford to bring them back.

"If we can afford to bring them back, that's what we want to do," Rockovich said.

West Hazleton, a financially distressed community, laid off all but one officer and relies on state police to fill the gaps in coverage.

A financial recovery plan put together by the Pennsylvania Economy League suggested the borough look to a regional force or another community for coverage.

In Butler Township, the only regionalization going on was the jointure of the Butler Township and Conyngham fire companies this summer, said Steve Hahn, township manager.

"There's no active discussions" concerning police, he said. "We're well covered in Butler."

A few miles away in Freeland, Mayor Tim Martin said the borough is doing well with its part-time police force.

"People are comfortable because we have coverage," he said, "even though it is part-time."

Martin remembers talks about Butler Township and Freeland joining police forces, but said he can't recall what happened with those discussions.

The borough also approached Foster Township, which doesn't have its own police, about coming in with Freeland, but those talks also ended, he said. Freeland may again approach Foster with a similar deal to the Dennison-White Haven agreement, he said.

And a regional force is still on the table as far as Martin is concerned.

"It's something we're going to bring up at the COG meeting," he said.

"Any time you're going to go in on something with other communities, it's going to help."

In Hazleton, Ferdinand also would look favorably on a regional police force, he said, because regionalization can and does work.

"As long as it is done properly and there is sufficient personnel to cover additional patrol areas, regionalization is a great idea that has worked in other areas," he said.

Regional police forces allow the combined department to offer more specialized services, such as a narcotics unit, K-9 unit, crime scene evidence collection, traffic reconstructionist or a tactical team, possible in communities that could not hope to do so on their own, Ferdinand explained.

While he supports regionalization, Ferdinand doesn't think the city could provide police coverage in adjacent communities without growing its force.

"Obviously, with our existing manpower, HPD is struggling to provide coverage to the city proper," he said, "and to add an additional area without increasing manpower would make it nearly impossible to provide adequate coverage to either ours, or any additional municipality."