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Joint venture?

Butler Township, Freeland officials in preliminary talks over cop merger

By SAM GALSKI

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A police merger has been the subject of preliminary talks involving officials from the nearby communities of Butler Township and Freeland Borough.

Butler Township Supervisor Judith Pekarek said that a potential merger of the Butler and Freeland police departments has been the subject of preliminary talks over the past two weeks.

Pekarek, who also serves as Butler's police liaison, said that no particular proposals or ideas have been discussed at this point.

"It's just preliminary right now," she said. "We're just discussing what would be best for both communities."

The concept surfaced when a Freeland council member approached the township with the idea, she said.

But Freeland councilman and police committee chair Dave Mahon said Friday that he was not aware of any such discussions.

Borough Mayor Tim Martin said that the concept has been kicked around over the past two years, but hasn't materialized.

Martin said he has since been working with council to rebuild Freeland's police department, which consists of eight part-time officers and one full-timer.

“We had discussed this with Butler two years ago. The price was just out of our league then. Basically, we would've liked them to cover us when we didn't have any coverage on. I think those talks with Butler started when we were short-handed. Now, we're pretty much back to staff.”

— Tim Martin,
Freeland mayor

"As far as I know, one council member did talk with (Pekarek)," Martin said. "We had discussed this with Butler two years ago. The price was just out of our league then. Basically we would've liked them to cover us when we didn't have any coverage on."

Martin, however, said that any such merger – or possibility of Freeland buying patrol time from the township – hinges on cost.

"That's what I think council is waiting on – is a cost factor," Martin said.

"I think those talks started with Butler when we were short-handed. Now, we're getting pretty much back to staff."

The borough obtained a police cruiser Friday and expects to pick up another Monday – which will give Freeland a total of three vehicles, Martin said.

Martin also spoke of plans to promote Freeland's officer in charge to another rank, which would be another step toward rebuilding the department, he said.

But Martin wasn't the only public official concerned for costs of a potential merger.

Pekarek said that would be one of many issues that Butler officials would have to look into if they were to seriously consider a merger.

"I don't know if it would save us money," she said.

"That remains to be seen. Our police budget is close to \$1 million. Butler, in 2006, has a \$9 million budget – \$6 million for the general budget and \$3 million for capital construction."

Butler's police department consists of eight officers who are responsible for patrolling the 36 square mile township, she said.

The Freeland and Butler police departments historically have worked together, with Pekarek and Martin saying the departments assist one another.

"They help us and we help them," Pekarek said.