

Regional police, building code among M-COG's future topics

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Two of the larger issues the Mountain Council of Governments may be tackling in the near future are code enforcement and regional police.

Dan Guydish, the M-COG's executive director, has been spearheading the effort to institute a code enforcement program that member municipalities can use, as well as helping those interested in a regional police force.

Guydish said he believes the time has come to form a regional department from the existing municipal police forces.

"We are seeing the beginnings of it, with Conyngham and Sugarloaf taking about (merging)," he told M-COG members recently. "West Hazleton is calling officers back, and Freeland has police issues."

In addition, some officials from Butler Township and Freeland apparently have discussed a police merger over the past two weeks, though other officials said they had no knowledge of the talks.

At the November meeting

of the council, Guydish intends to have a speaker who will be able to guide local municipal officials on how to best set up a regional department. The meeting will be held at 8 a.m. Nov. 2, the first Thursday of the month, in the second-floor conference room of the CAN DO Renaissance Center.

When the M-COG last discussed the regional police concept a few years ago, representatives from the City of Hazleton and Butler and Hazle townships were at the table, but they never got past the discussion stage.

In 2001, eight municipalities expressed interest in forming a regional force and participated in a study conducted by the Governor's Center for Local Government Services. However, the study was discontinued after several municipalities dropped out.

Meanwhile, with Pennsylvania's adoption of the Uniform Construction Code (UCC), the jobs of inspection and issuing permits becomes more complex.

The state's municipalities have until April to decide how to handle residential building

inspections. The M-COG has been trying to help local municipalities pick the best option.

Guydish said municipalities have to choose whether to "opt in" to the new state law, Act 45, which contains provisions of the national Uniform Building Code, or "opt out" and allow state inspectors to do local inspections.

But Guydish said it is better for municipalities to opt in and either do the inspections themselves or hire an outside firm like Hazleton has done.

Hiring an outside firm is less expensive than having trained inspectors on duty - especially if a municipality does not have enough inspections to keep the inspector busy on a full-time basis, Guydish said.

It's a "win-win situation" to opt in, he said, as hiring a third-party company will save money, especially for smaller municipalities where needs are infrequent. And they will make some money on issuing permits.

Act 45 went into effect some time ago, but inspectors

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who were not trained were "grandfathered" in, meaning they did not have to be trained in the new codes - until next April for residential inspections and April 2008 for commercial inspections.

Guydish said municipalities can opt in to parts of the law; for instance, just residential or just commercial. Or they can give the residential inspections to a third-party vendor and do commercial inspections themselves, or vice versa.

But Guydish wants to get local municipalities together and hire a third-party service

through the M-COG - so that each municipality would get the lowest price.

Another problem with state inspections, he said, is that they are done when inspectors are available. So a building owner may have to wait several weeks after requesting one.

But if a third-party company would be hired for the area, Guydish reasoned, it would have somebody in the area who would schedule inspections geographically, and there would not be a long wait.

Guydish said any municipalities interested in finding out more on any M-COG topic can call him at 455-1508.