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Expert: Regional police force not for everybody

■ With some area municipalities at least talking about the idea of a regional police force, governmental consultant Richard Manfredi spoke to the Mountain Council of Governments Thursday.

By **JIM DINO**

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If area municipal officials want to form a regional police force, they have to decide why they want it, the level of service they want and the structure they want it to have, an expert says.

Richard Manfredi, a governmental consultant and Hazleton area native, gave his opinions on how a regional police force for the area could be formed Thursday morning before more than a dozen local officials at the Mountain Council of Governments (M-COG).

Manfredi and Matt Domines of the state Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) – the state agency that assists municipalities setting up regional departments – said a regional force could save money – but could also cost the same or “maybe a little more” than they are paying now.

Dan Guydish, M-COG’s director, a proponent of a regional department, said a regional force would have more specialists – detectives, crime scene investigators, and SWAT, or special weapons and tactics.

“With a regional department, you get more bang for your buck,” Guydish said. “Officers get more training. You have a more professional staff. Just like the 13 colonies realized, being separated was a weakness, so they formed a union, the United States.”

Guydish said a study in 2001 included seven municipi-

ties – the City of Hazleton, the boroughs of West Hazleton, Freeland and Beaver Meadows; and Hazle, Butler and Sugarloaf townships.

A follow-up study was done in 2002, when Hazleton, Butler and Hazle townships were still pursuing the idea.

Manfredi – who helped form the Pocono Mountain Regional Police Department a decade ago when he was township manager in Tobyhanna Township, Monroe County – said municipal officials have to look at what they have now and what they want for the future to see how a regional force would do better.

“You have to decide why you want to do it,” Manfredi said. “A regional force could be good, but not always. You have to formulate your costs, and how they will be distributed (among the municipalities). You have to analyze the cost of your present services. You have to decide what’s more important – response to a call or patrol. You have to determine what kind of services you want from it.”

Domines said a \$99,000 state grant is available to start up a regional department, plus a Municipal Services Grant that would pay for half of about \$5,000 needed for a study, and another program that would pay a regional police chief’s salary 75, 50 and 25 percent over the first three years.

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The 2001 study could be used as a basis, Domines said. But Manfredi said when the study was done for Pocono Mountain, he had to retrace the study to make it locally applicable.

Manfredi said when all of the costs are combined, they are factored into what is called a PPU, or Police Protection Unit. This unit is then used by municipalities to purchase as much police service as they want.

While a municipality can buy as much patrol time as they want, no matter how much they buy, that municipality has police coverage 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That means a resident can pick up the telephone and report a crime and police will respond.

Domines said the first step municipalities can take is to

send DCED a letter of intent. A study will then be scheduled.

Municipalities that have a police department would have their officers join the new regional department, the men said. Whatever equipment a municipality brings in, they would get credit for it.

Officials said one of the biggest hurdles was the pension fund for the new department.

"That was the lynchpin for us, too," Manfredi said of the Poconos regional department. "We ended up giving them a pension package similar to the state police. It was an incentive to officers. The officers had to buy into the regional idea, or it wouldn't have worked."

Domines said that of the 33 regional departments in operation in the state, none have ever disbanded after forming.

The first regional department formed in 1973.

The two men said officials also have to gauge the interest of citizens. On the downside, communities lose their identity, and local officials lose control over police departments.

"The last time for us, the opinion was mixed," said Freeland Mayor Tim Martin. "The people didn't want to lose their identity and they didn't want to lose the police station, where they could walk right in with a complaint."

Domines said while a regional department is better equipped to handle a major crime than a local department would, it can also handle the smaller cases – vandalism or graffiti – that state police may push to a back burner during a busy time.

Joseph Yannuzzi, M-COG chairman and Hazleton City councilman who is also a pro-

ponent of a regional department, said if municipalities were interested, they could express that interest without committing themselves to anything.

Conyngham Councilman Neil Rodino said that borough and Sugarloaf Township have discussed forming a regional department for those two municipalities.

Another stumbling block was the number of municipal representatives on the police commission that will run the department for the municipalities.

Yannuzzi said that problem had been solved, when Hazleton agreed to only two representatives, with one each for the other municipalities.

"We will visit this idea again," Yannuzzi said. "By the turnout, there seems to be interest, so we will keep revisiting the issue."