

Mine Hill, Wharton set to share single court

Unanimous approval could save each \$30,000 per year

BY TIEN-SHUN LEE
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Wharton and Mine Hill councils both unanimously approved a proposal to share a single court between the two municipalities at a meeting on Monday night.

Mine Hill Administrator Barry Lewis estimated that the shared service agreement would save each municipality about \$30,000 each year.

"This will benefit taxpayers. It should help save money and keep the taxes down -- that's the most important thing," Lewis said.

The next step in implementing the shared court is for B. Theodore Bozonelis, the assignment judge of Morris and Sussex counties, to review the proposal, along with the state Administrative Office of the Courts in Trenton.

If the proposals are approved by Bozonelis and the AOC, then Wharton and Mine Hill will begin sharing court services on Jan. 1, 2007.

At first, the shared court will continue to operate in two different locations. But once Mine Hill's public works garage is revamped into a court office space, personnel and equipment will be merged into the Mine Hill location.

Construction on the new court office space will probably begin next spring, and the space is likely to be ready in July 2007, Lewis said.

The shared court will hold sessions three times a month, Lewis said.

Currently, both Mine Hill and Wharton hold court sessions twice a month, or sometimes three times per month, depending on case loads.

"There really should be minimal effect for the public," Lewis said. "If you get a ticket in Wharton, you might have to drive an extra mile to get to Mine Hill, but it shouldn't be any more than a mile difference."

Wharton Borough Administrator Jon Rheinhardt said sharing a municipal court between Mine Hill and Wharton is a natural step following the municipalities' implementation of a shared police department in early 2004.

"It's going to be more efficient and it will provide another way of reducing taxes to the residents of both communities," he said.

On Monday night, Wharton and Mine Hill councils also voted to extend the contract to share a police department for ten years, until 2016. The contract had been scheduled to expire in 2009.

Sharing a police department has saved both Wharton and Mine Hill between \$150,000 and \$200,000 per year, according to Rheinhardt and Lewis.

Wharton's municipal court has been operating without a court administrator since 2004, when the previous administrator retired.

"We didn't want to hire somebody and then look for a reduction once the sharing was implemented," Rheinhardt explained.

Similarly, Mine Hill's court has been operating without a public defender in anticipation of the shared court.

While the shared court will initially have two of some staff, through attrition, the court will eventually have a single prosecutor, judge, public defender and administrator, Lewis said.

"I would think by next year at this time we'll be down to the proper staffing levels," Lewis said. "We have one potential retirement and another person is looking to pursue a full-time position elsewhere."

Wharton and Mine Hill received a \$35,000 state grant in 2004 to help cover transitional costs for sharing a court.

Irene Turner, the municipal division manager for Morris and Sussex counties, noted that shared municipal courts are different from joint municipal courts in that shared courts keep their accounting separate.

Currently, Mendham Borough and Mendham Township are the only municipalities in Morris County that share a municipal court.

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