

[Click to Print](#)[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Posted on Mon, Jun. 30, 2008

Police mergers not all ideal

By Jan Hefler
Inquirer Staff Writer

When Woodlynne Mayor Jeraldo Fuentes disbanded his town's police force and signed an agreement to get coverage from neighboring Collingswood, he figured there would be big budget savings.

Two years later, he's disappointed that he still can't lower taxes.

Larry Pennock, mayor of Audubon Park Borough, made a similar move in 2004, overcoming public opposition to merge his force with Audubon Borough's.

His town, he said, has "considerable savings" and is locked into a five-year contract that removes the worry of rising salaries and fuel bills.

As municipal officials around New Jersey and Pennsylvania consider merging police forces, seeking savings in a tough economy, the Woodlynne experience shows significant savings are no certainty. But with dwindling financial help from state leaders, some local officials are pursuing mergers - hoping for Audubon-like results - even though residents typically fight hard to save their departments.

"Politically, it's difficult to sell to constituents," said William Dressel Jr., executive director of the New Jersey State League of Municipalities. He said the Borough and the Township of Princeton have sent proposals to the voters three times, and have struck out each time.

The N.J. Department of Community Affairs is aware of only 16 communities out of 566 that have taken the leap, while Pennsylvania officials report there are fewer than 40 regional departments out of more than 1,100 police departments.

To improve the numbers, Gov. Corzine has proposed setting aside \$32 million for towns to study mergers. In Pennsylvania, the Department of Community and Economic Development has published a 70-page guide to help local leaders go through the

process.

National Park Borough, in Gloucester County, is mired in controversy over its proposal to abolish its four-man police force and to have Westville take over. Residents have packed meetings and signs are posted around town. A public hearing is slated for July 9.

National Park officials want a merger because of scarce money and because they see an opening for a change. In March, their longtime police chief retired, followed a few weeks later by a sergeant and a patrolman.

Borough Administrator Vikki Holmstrom says the town is now faced with hiring more officers - without having much money to pay for salaries - or working out a merger. The chief's retirement smooths the way for the merger, she said, because it removes the issue of who should be chief.

Still, some residents want to save their local police.

"When you call for a policeman, you want a policeman - you don't want to wait," said Terry Gismondi, a businessman and lifelong resident with a relative on the force.

Riverton, in Burlington County, is considering joining with Cinnaminson and Palmyra - its third attempt. But Riverton officials promise voters will have a say on the issue if their study comes back with a green light.

"I think in the long run it would cost more," said longtime Riverton Police Chief Robert Norcross. Smaller towns pay their officers less and their salaries would have to be increased under a merger, he said.

Mayor Chris Blaydon, in Langhorne, Bucks County, disagrees, saying a merger should reduce costs. Langhorne, Langhorne Manor and Penndel are looking into a regional police department.

"The positives are sharing the cost of a chief, cars, computers and buildings. Now we have three of each," he said.

But Dressel says such consolidations can be difficult.

"How do you reconcile two chiefs, two lieutenants, two captains, and their pensions?" he said. While he believes the mergers should be evaluated, he says he isn't sure they "automatically will translate into dollar savings."

Narberth, in Montgomery County, toyed with having Lower Merion Police cover its half-square-mile borough. But signs objecting to the move sprouted on lawns and the borough recently withdrew from a joint study.

Other boroughs researching mergers are Woolwich and Swedesboro in Gloucester

County.

A few years after Fuentes became mayor of Woodlynne, less than a square mile, the former boxer found himself facing a problem he couldn't knock out on his own.

The borough's eight-member police force was stretched so thin, he said, sometimes only one officer was patrolling the streets.

"It was a crisis situation," said Fuentes, recalling how paperwork duties and accrued time off had affected patrols.

Fuentes, who became mayor five years ago, decided to merge his town's police force with neighboring Collingswood's. In July 2006, Collingswood hired half of Woodlynne's officers, and then brought on two more to create a merged department of 40 officers. Though that meant two fewer, overall, Woodlynne gained the services of Collingswood's detective bureau and school-resource officers, two assets it didn't have before.

To ease any lingering feelings of loss of identity, Collingswood altered its patrol cars to read: "Serving Collingswood and Woodlynne."

Fuentes said service has markedly improved.

Collingswood provides the service for \$650,000 a year - a \$150,000 annual cost savings to Woodlynne. But Fuentes was shocked to see the entire amount evaporate the first year, in 2007, when he found out severance and buyout packages cost as much. State aid also dipped that year and Fuentes had to raise taxes.

Now, when he is asked whether a merger is worth it, he warns towns: "You won't save much money."

This year, taxes again will rise, possibly as much as \$600 for an average taxpayer, because the state is planning an aid cut. He didn't want to speculate how much higher it might be had there been no merger.

Collingswood Mayor M. James Maley Jr. is also upset about Woodlynne's situation. "Their savings are going out the window as the state pulls out its aid money," he said. Yet Woodlynne is doing what the state wants, Maley said.

Maley urged legislators at a state budget hearing in March to change regulations so that towns can get state aid to pay the severance benefit costs. These represent the "biggest expenses of consolidation," he said.

Audubon Park Mayor Pennock said his borough also was hit with these costs the first two years after its 2004 merger. Taxes rose minimally those years to cover the costs and losses in state aid, but then last year there was no increase in taxes. It was the first time in a long time, he said, and the borough also was able to create its first surplus in years.

Pennock said the borough pays \$2 million for five years of police service, a \$200,000 projected savings.

Four of Audubon Park's five full-time officers were hired by Audubon Borough, and their chief was bought out. The merged department has 22 officers.

Pennock said his town had anticipated the initial costs and "was looking at the big picture," and future savings.

But it wasn't easy. Pennock recalls how people had protested and how many discussions were needed to convince them it was worthwhile.

"Once people got past the initial shock that we're not going to have our own police," Pennock said, "they became more and more comfortable with it."

Pennock admits that even he was initially skeptical. "But when we projected the numbers, we realized, we can't afford to not make this deal," he said.

Police Department Mergers

Merged or Regionalized Police Departments in N.J.

Audubon Borough and Audubon Park Borough

Collingswood Borough and Woodlynne Borough

Cape May City, West Cape May and Cape May Point

Washington Township (Morris Co) and Califon Borough

Moonachie, Little Ferry and Teterboro Boroughs

Wharton Borough and Mine Hill Township

Northvale Borough and Rockleigh Borough

In Philadelphia Suburbs

East and West Rockhill Townships

Upper Perkiomen Valley, East Greenville, and Pennsburg Boroughs

Westtown, East Goshen and Thornbury Townships

East Brandywine and Wallace Townships

- *Jan Hefler*

Contact staff writer Jan Hefler at 856-779-3224 or jhefler@phillynews.com.

Buzz this story.

Find this article at:

http://www.philly.com/inquirer/home_top_stories/20080630_Police_mergers_may_not_be_a_panacea.html?adString=inq.news/home_top_stories;!category=home_top_stories;&randomOrd=063008041841

 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© Copyright | Philly Online, LLC. All Rights Reserved. Any copying, redistribution or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the express written consent of Philly Online, LLC is expressly prohibited.