

More police could mean more taxes

By: **CHRISTOPHER RUVO** (Sun, Mar/23/2008)

Should Richland hire 10 new police officers, as a township panel suggested, taxes would likely skyrocket.

While it's difficult to say by how much, adding just five officers would shoot taxes up "at least 5 mills or more," estimated Supervisor Rick Orloff, a certified public accountant.

That would triple the current property tax rate of 2.5 mills. A mill is a tax of \$1 on every \$1,000 of a property's assessed value.

Under the rate of 2.5 mills — the seventh lowest in Bucks County — the owner of a home in Richland assessed at \$35,000 pays \$87.50 annually. Under a rate of 7.5 mills, the same homeowner would pay \$262.50, a \$175 increase.

Richland police patrol the township about 75 percent of the time. State police pick up the other 25 percent, while simultaneously covering other Upper Bucks municipalities.

The township's community police liaison board studied going with full-time local coverage and believes the cost is worth it.

"The board recommends hiring additional officers in a deliberate and methodical manner until our goal of a professional, full-service 24/7 police department is met," said Steve Cardell, board chairman.

Taking Orloff's estimate of 5 mills for five new officers, the property tax rate would increase to 12.5 mills to support the recommended 22-man police force.

Given that, a homeowner whose property is assessed at \$35,000 would pay \$437.50 annually in Richland property taxes, a \$350 increase over the current bill.

"This is a significant decision and a costly decision," said Supervisor Craig Staats.

Spending on the police department makes up more than 20 percent of Richland's 2008 budget, coming in at \$1.7 million of \$7.5 million. Nearly \$1.3 million of police department spending is on salaries and benefits, said Davina Martin, Richland's finance director.

Salary levels range from \$36,145 for a new hire undergoing academy training to \$78,000 for the chief.

The department will pay two sergeants \$66,270 this year and five officers who have at least five years' experience \$63,115, Martin said. The current police contract features built-in annual raises of 3 percent or 4 percent depending on the year. That deal runs out next year, meaning costs are likely to rise even higher.

Supervisors have not instructed the finance director to crack numbers on the monetary impact of hiring 10 more officers, said Martin.

"It's premature," said Staats. "We need additional information."

Supervisors plan to have the police department audited this year to make sure it's performing efficiently.

The audit will cost nothing because it will be done by the Governor's Center for Local Government Services, a division of the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, officials said.

The findings, coupled with community input and more research, will play key roles in hiring plans for the police department, supervisors said.

"Right now, 10 more officers sounds aggressive to me," said Staats. "But we have to get the information to see."

Richland Police Chief Larry Cerami said expanding the department to offer 24/7 coverage comes down two things: safety and service.

"Linking contract talk and the like to public safety is dangerous ground in my opinion," he said. "You can't put a price on safety."

Richland's force is understaffed compared to neighboring departments, and officers risk burning out when working excessive overtime, the chief said. Quakertown has 17 officers, including the chief; Pennridge, which covers East and West Rockhill, has 13.

While the idea has surfaced during informal discussion to hire enough officers to offer 24-hour local coverage a few days a week, the suggestion drew a scoff from Cerami.

"With police work, it's not as simple as just trying to fill hours," Cerami said. "We need the right structure to make sure our officers have adequate backup and the community is safe."

The chief believes the force could go 24/7 with 18 officers and then steadily increase to 22 to be a "full-service" department.

The community police liaison board has said a 22-man, full-time force should result in quicker responses and in-depth investigations. It would also allow officers to focus on specialties, such as traffic enforcement, canine units and working with juveniles.

The chief said Richland's 2003 10-year capital plan called for 24 officers and four police support staff by 2010. "We're not even asking for as much as the report said we could have," he said.

Richland has seen a significant increase in calls for police service as the township grows.

The department received about 1,200 more calls in 2007 than it did in 2006, rising from 4,749 to 5,909, according to police. The 2007 call load was about 2,000 more than the 2005 number.

The Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission estimates that Richland's population will, by 2030, have more than doubled its 2000 level, reaching 20,500 residents, the largest projected percentage increase in Bucks County. Call load will continue to rise.

Beyond that, there are all the incidents that never occurred because a township officer was on duty in an area where a would-be criminal was poised to break the law, Cerami said.

"The whole expansion situation really depends on how much supervisors value safety and service for the public and safety for our officers," he said.

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