

MIDDLETOWN

Supervisors debate motorcycle patrols

The patrols have many advantages and should be resumed, the police chief said.

By CHRIS ENGLISH COURIER TIMES

Chris English can be reached at 215-949-4193 or cenglish@phillyburbs.com.

The Middletown supervisors and other township officials are debating whether to resume police motorcycle patrols after an officer was injured and the motorcycle he was riding was damaged in a July 27 accident with a SEPTA bus.

Police Chief Frank McKenna said Officer Dave Denton was stopped and waiting to make a left turn near the Oxford Valley Mall when the bus cut its turn too short and ran into the motorcycle. Denton suffered shoulder and hip injuries and was out of work for more than a month before returning in late August, McKenna said.

Middletown got the motorcycle for free on a loan agreement with a township dealership, Brian's Harley-Davidson.

Before approving another loan agreement with the dealership for a new motorcycle that would allow patrols to resume, the supervisors directed insurance consultant Jay McManus to study the benefits and risks of police motorcycle patrols. McManus reported back that, among the municipalities he works for, there has been no significant cutback in police motorcycle patrols because of perceived risk, said township Manager Richard Gestrich.

McKenna hopes the board votes at its Dec. 11 meeting to approve the loan agreement and resume motorcycle patrols.

"A motorcycle is very useful in getting to accident scenes or other places in a situation where a police car might be hindered," he said. "If you have a big traffic backup on Route 1 or a road like that, the motorcycle can squeeze between lines of traffic and get to the scene of the accident. When someone's life may be in danger, getting someone to the scene before other types of vehicles can get there is very valuable."

Among the other advantages of police motorcycles is that they are more easily hidden than cars and so, in a lot of cases, are more useful for catching speeders, McKenna added.

"We've been very careful in the use of the motorcycle," he said. "It only patrols during the day, doesn't go out during inclement weather and is not allowed to engage in any high-speed pursuits."

Having the motorcycle did not drive up insurance costs, said the township's assistant manager, Frank Farry. A motorcycle also uses a lot less gasoline than a car and saves some wear and tear on patrol cars, he added.

The damaged motorcycle was repaired and returned to the dealership, Farry added. The \$5,800 cost was covered under insurance other than a \$1,000 deductible, he said. The township insurer is working to recover all costs from SEPTA, Farry said. A spokesman for SEPTA, Gary Fairfax, said the authority did not dispute Middletown's version of the incident and declined further comment.

Bensalem Director of Public Safety Fred Harran said his township uses six police motorcycles for patrols and that the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages.

"There's been some accidents involving the motorcycles, but no injuries to officers," he said. "Our motorcycle patrols have been above average on calls, citations and arrests. We started with two motorcycles and now have six, and I can see it increasing from there."