

## MIDDLETOWN

## Supervisors want 'bang for their buck'

*Proposals give a better idea of a firm's experience and qualifications, the township manager said.*

By CHRIS ENGLISH COURIER TIMES

Before hiring or reappointing its township solicitor, engineer and other professionals early next year, Middletown will play the field.

In a move township Manager Richard Gestrich called rare in the state, the supervisors recently voted to seek proposals from firms wishing to fill professional posts. As in most Pennsylvania municipalities, the Middletown board has usually just hired firms suggested by one or two supervisors that the majority could agree on, Gestrich said.

"They've decided this time to open it up and make it a competitive process to see if they can get highly qualified professionals at a good reduced fee schedule," he said. "It's fairly common in New Jersey, but unusual in Pennsylvania, and I think it's an excellent idea."

Pennsylvania law doesn't require going out to bid or seeking requests for proposals for professional services, and the supervisors can still hire whoever they want regardless of what they see in the proposals, said Gestrich. Still, requesting proposals offers advantages, he said.

"Once it's competitive, the likelihood is you'll get a better fee proposal," said Gestrich. "Also, requesting written proposals forces a firm to identify the person from the firm who will actually be serving the township, and [stating] that person's experience and qualifications. Firms will be required to include their other municipal clients in the proposals, and that gives us a chance to contact those municipal clients to see what kind of job the firm has been doing."

The township has requested proposals from firms seeking to fill the jobs of township solicitor, engineer, traffic engineer, bond counsel, conflict solicitor and conflict engineer, said Gestrich. Conflict professionals step in on specific cases when the regular firm has some conflict of interest, he explained.

There is also a request for proposals from firms that would do consulting, maintenance and repair on township computers, said Gestrich. He expects the proposals to be back by Nov. 28.

Township professionals for 2008 will be hired at the reorganization meeting the first week in January by the new board of supervisors, consisting of Republicans Lisa Pflaumer, Jasper Caro and George Leonhauser and Democrat Robert McMonagle. Bucks County commissioner-elect Diane Marseglia, a Democrat, resigned her supervisor post to get ready for the county position. It's unknown whether Marseglia's replacement will be appointed by the remaining supervisors in time for the reorganization meeting.

Gestrich said requesting proposals for professionals was pushed mainly by Pflaumer, the board chairwoman. The Courier Times was unsuccessful in attempts to reach her for comment.

McMonagle and Caro both said requesting proposals is sound.

"It's always a good idea to look around and see who might be out there who could offer taxpayers the best bang for their buck," said McMonagle. "So far, I've been pleased with the work product of our current professionals, and I might vote to reappoint them. But I won't know until I look at all the proposals. Nothing is etched in stone."

McMonagle said he doesn't base his vote for township professionals on a firm's political leanings or contributions.

"I couldn't tell you what party our current professionals belong to," he said. "My job is to get the best work product for the township taxpayers' money."

Caro had similar thoughts.

"I don't really have a problem with our professionals and I think they're doing a pretty good job, but I'll base my decisions on what is good for the township and what is the better deal for the township," he said. "Competition is always better."