

MIDDLETOWN

Board considers installing director of public safety

By *CHRIS ENGLISH*
STAFF WRITER

As the long career of Middletown police Chief Frank McKenna enters its last few months, the township supervisors are reaching some tentative conclusions on how to replace him.

McKenna, 72, is set to retire on Jan. 31 after 51 years on the Middletown force, the last 20 as chief.

Supervisors Chairman Robert McMonagle said the board is leaning toward changing the chief of police position to director of public safety, at least temporarily, once McKenna leaves.

Directors of public safety are basically at-will employees of municipal governing bodies and, unlike police chiefs, have much less protection against dismissal. Under the police tenure act, police chiefs can be fired only under certain circumstances.

Unlike police chiefs, public safety directors also have authority over other public safety areas like fire protection.

"I've talked to board members and the consensus seems to be for a public safety director," said McMonagle. "Or, we could come up with some sort of hybrid between a PSD and police chief. Another option is hiring a public safety director that would morph into a chief of police after 18 months. That would give us time to know whether the person is fit for the job and, if not, would give us the ability to find someone else. You're not stuck with a chief of police who can't be replaced."

Supervisor Chuck Thompson said he shared those views. The newspaper was unsuccessful in its attempts to reach Supervisor Kathy Heuer for her opinion.

The other two supervisors, Jasper Caro and George Leonhauser, oppose a public safety director. Critics say the position brings politics much more into the equation and Caro and Leonhauser agree.

"Middletown has always had a chief of police and that should continue," said Leonhauser, a former township cop. "A public safety director is contractual and can be removed and it's too political. I would rather have someone who does the job because of wanting to do the job the right way and not being swayed by the politics of it all. A police chief doesn't have to be beholden to anyone."

Added Caro: "I don't think [a public safety director] is a good idea. I want a civil servant in there. We have enough politics."

McKenna, who will be 73 by the time he retires, said he doesn't want to be replaced with a public safety director.

"The only place I know of that has one is Bensalem, and in that case, they brought somebody [Fred Harran] up through the department and it seems to be working," said McKenna. "But Middletown has always had a chief of police and it's functioned very well here. I don't see a need to change that aspect of the department."

Detective Brian McDonough, vice president of the Middletown police union, declined to comment on the possible change in the force's structure. The newspaper was unsuccessful in its attempts to reach Detective Dale Keddie, the union president, for comment. It was also unsuccessful in reaching Lieutenants Patrick McGinty and James Kane, the highest-ranking members of the department after McKenna, for comment.

Supervisor Thompson said the "political" criticisms of a public safety director position have been exaggerated.

"Politics permeates everything, whether it's a public safety director or chief of police," he said. "If a PSD is needed to better provide security services for our residents, that is what will happen. I'm looking at what is needed and what is best for the people I represent."

There are advantages to a public safety director, Thompson added.

"We can get somebody with a civilian outlook on what is going on but also with the

administrative abilities to handle the police department," he said. "A director of public safety is more answerable to the board of supervisors. Right now, I feel we need someone who is more responsive to the board of supervisors' concerns."

Thompson continued: "I have no problems with Chief McKenna. I have great respect for him, but I think there is a need for some new blood to reinvigorate the force. One of my prime complaints living near Route 413 is the motorcycles roaring up and down, and I don't think the police are enforcing the noise ordinance as well as they could. I think new leadership that would be responsive to the board of supervisors in the beginning would enable us to say we want something done, and the director would have to see that it's done."

McKenna responded: "I have no comment on that. I'm not sure where [Thompson] is coming from on that."

Bensalem is the only area department with a public safety director. Falls recently switched back to a chief of police after having a public safety director for several years.

McKenna has been enrolled in the Deferred Retirement Option Program since 2003. Under that program, once township police become eligible they can have their pension payments deposited into an account and then either receive them in a lump sum or added to their pensions once they retire.

McKenna is making \$111,115 this year. That includes a \$103,487 base salary and a \$7,627 longevity payment. Many Middletown employees receive a special bonus called longevity pay based on their years of service in the township.

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