

## MIDDLETOWN

## Board disagrees on new manager

*A former supervisor and Buckingham manager is the new administrator in Middletown.*

By CHRIS ENGLISH  
STAFF WRITER

Chris English can be reached at 215-949-4193 or .

Middletown's new township manager comes with too much baggage, the two supervisors who voted against his hiring said Wednesday. The other three said they hired the best person for the job.

Raymond Stepnoski, fired in January after five years as Buckingham's manager, was hired for the same position in Middletown by a 3-2 vote late at Tuesday night's supervisors' meeting. He started work Wednesday at an annual salary of \$117,000.

Robert McMonagle, Chuck Thompson and Kathy Heuer voted to appoint Stepnoski to succeed Richard Gestrich, who left for a city manager's job in Florida last week. Jasper Caro and George Leonhauser voted no.

"I don't think he gave a good interview," said Caro. "It seemed like you almost had to pull answers out of him. He had five years experience as a manager, but to me, the firing took away from that."

Stepnoski was fired as Buckingham's manager in a 2-1 vote by the three-member board of supervisors. Jon Forest and Maggie Rash voted for his dismissal and Henry Rowan against. Forest and Rash said the township needed new direction but would not elaborate. The newspaper was unsuccessful in its attempts to reach the three Buckingham supervisors for comment Wednesday.

Stepnoski, 51, said he believed he did a good job in Buckingham and was never given an explanation for his dismissal.

"I have no idea why," he said, and added he's looking forward to a long tenure in Middletown.

"The most important thing right now is getting acquainted with the township and the employees and just trying to move forward in a very positive way for Middletown," said Stepnoski, who lives in Buckingham.

According to published reports, police barred Stepnoski from his office the day after the firing. He had shown up about 4 a.m. to clean out the office.

Stepnoski was a supervisor for nine years in Buckingham before taking over as manager from Max Weisman, who was fired. In a federal lawsuit, Weisman claimed the township pushed him out to make room for Stepnoski, who had lost his job as a research scientist. Buckingham officials denied the charges but settled the lawsuit for \$400,000.

"Other than the brief and questionable term as Buckingham manager, Stepnoski had no other municipal management experience," Leonhauser said. "He has no degree in public administration, but does have a master's in biophysics, according to his resume."

"The current Middletown board majority perceive an employee attitude on the administration side. They want someone to crack the whip and apparently think that Stepnoski will fit the bill. Mr. Caro and I don't agree with that assessment or solution."

Stepnoski had no reaction to comments by Caro and Leonhauser and said he hasn't spoken to them.

Thompson said more discipline is needed on the Middletown staff but said Leonhauser's "crack the whip" reference was too strong.

"We wanted a strong manager who can take control of the township and make the moves necessary to move the township forward, and we think we've found the person to do it," said Thompson. "We think [Stepnoski] will enforce discipline while being fair and when that happens,

I think all the employees benefit and feel better about what they are doing."

The Middletown supervisors had narrowed a list of 14 applicants down to three finalists by Monday. One of the finalists withdrew his name from consideration on Tuesday, leaving two. Thompson said he was leaning toward the other candidate before a 45-minute phone conversation with Stepnoski.

"He had some really good ideas about the township and what needs to be done," said Thompson. "He seemed to be very good at employee discipline, which we need, but also good at bolstering employee morale, so there was a balance there."

Thompson said that from all he could find out about Stepnoski's firing in Buckingham, it was politically motivated and not related to performance.

Paula Kearns, a human resources consultant for Middletown who helped with the manager search, said she had an opinion on who should have been hired but declined to share it. She had praise for Stepnoski.

"I was impressed with the answers we got from Mr. Stepnoski," said Kearns. "I think his ideas were innovative and interesting and something the township can benefit from. He has talked about going paperless at board meetings. Right now, the supervisors get reams and reams of paper. He's also big into environmental things and would like to expand those kinds of programs in the township. He sounds like a hands-on guy whose door is always open, and he has done budgets and labor negotiations, and all that is good."

In a letter of recommendation submitted to Middletown, Rowan praised Stepnoski.

"Politics and pettiness have cost Buckingham one of the very best managers in the state, but I take some solace in knowing that a good neighbor may benefit significantly from our loss," said Rowan in the letter.