

MIDDLETOWN

Board approves temporary hire for personnel officer

By *CHRIS ENGLISH*
STAFF WRITER

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

A former township administrator who left amid some controversy four years ago has returned to her old position to temporarily fill in and help look for a permanent replacement.

The Middletown supervisors voted 3-2 at a recent meeting to hire former personnel officer Paula Kearns. She agreed to a 90-day contract that will pay her \$50 an hour for up to 30 hours a week, which would amount to \$1,500 a week.

Democrats Robert McMonagle, Kathy Heuer and Chuck Thompson voted to approve the contract, and Republicans Jasper Caro and George Leonhauser dissented. Kearns is a Democrat, but no board member indicated politics played a role in their vote.

In addition to helping out with personnel and human resources matters, Kearns will help township Manager Richard Gestrich and other officials search for a permanent personnel or human resources director. The plan is to make that position part time with no health insurance benefits, Kearns said.

Caro and Leonhauser believed Kearns' hiring at the June 10 meeting was too sudden.

"I didn't think there was a look into other potential people or companies to do this," Caro said.

"My major concern is we didn't discuss her application as a board," Leonhauser added. "I just thought we would talk about different options. I received her tentative contract the morning of the meeting. I have nothing against Paula personally. I knew her when she was here before and I was a policeman in the township, but it just seemed like this was pushed down our throats."

Leonhauser said he also wanted more time to look into Kearns' history with the township.

Kearns resigned in 2004 after 10 years as personnel officer, the last four as a full-time employee. She left along with township Manager John Burke after some sources told the newspaper Burke had refused to fire Kearns over a matter where she had allegedly acted improperly. That account could never be officially confirmed and neither Burke nor Kearns would comment.

Soon after Kearns' departure, the Bucks County District Attorney investigated whether she had improperly deleted some files from her computer before leaving. Kearns maintained she had done nothing wrong, and no charges were filed.

"I was asked by the chairman of the board and township manager to help out and I'm happy to do it," said Kearns of her current role. "I've lived in this community for many years and only want to help it continue to flourish."

The contract with Kearns is one step in the process for replacing the assistant township manager, Frank Farry, who resigned over issues with his candidacy for state representative. Farry handled many personnel issues along with many other duties, including township insurance matters.

In addition to the parttime personnel or human resources director, Kearns said she is also helping township officials look for a new full-time community services coordinator who would take over Farry's non-personnel duties. No salary range has been established for either position, Kearns said.

McMonagle, the board chairman, said it was hypocritical for Caro and Leonhauser to criticize Kearns' hiring when they agreed days before the June 10 meeting that getting someone in quickly to handle personnel matters was critical. The two supervisors didn't bring any viable alternatives to the table at the June 10 meeting, McMonagle added.

"Paula not only has institutional knowledge of the township but also the best credentials of

anyone we could have hired," said McMonagle.

In addition to her experience, Kearns has a master's degree in public administration from Arizona State University with an emphasis on personnel management.

Kearns said she will continue working in the office of her husband, Middletown tax collector Tom Kearns. She is also executive director of the Middletown Community Foundation.

Middletown is also looking for a new township manager to replace Gestrich, who is leaving July 3 to take the same position in Oviedo, Fla. McMonagle said Middletown has so far received about 12 applications, two from people with previous experience as a township manager, and he still hopes to have Gestrich's successor in place by the time he leaves.