

## MIDDLETOWN

## 9 officers apply for safety director

*A township detective and police union president said a PSD can work if the right person is chosen.*

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Nine Middletown cops have applied for the public safety director position that will take effect when police Chief Frank McKenna retires Jan. 31, supervisors Chairman Robert McMonagle said.

The township also has received four outside applications. Middletown will continue to accept outside applications until Oct. 31 and hopes to name a public safety director by the third or fourth week in November, McMonagle said.

McMonagle declined to name those who have applied.

The supervisors voted 3-2 at a recent meeting to make the change in positions when McKenna leaves. McMonagle, Kathy Heuer and Chuck Thompson voted yes and Jasper Caro and George Leonhauser no.

Leonhauser, a former township cop, and Caro both feel a public safety director, who serves at the will of the board, will be more subject to political interference. The other three board members feel it's better to have a public safety director in charge of all emergency operations in the township.

Under the police tenure act, a police chief receives much more protection against dismissal.

"Quite a few of our members wanted to stick with a chief of police because they felt politics would get too involved with public safety director," said Middletown Detective Dale Keddie, president of the township Police Benevolent Association, the police union, this year.

Keddie said he applied for the public safety director job but then withdrew after learning the supervisors intended to stick with that system and not switch back to police chief in 18 months.

"That was my own personal thing because as public safety director, there is no tenure and no job security and that sticks in a lot of people's minds as an issue," he said.

However, a public safety director can work in Middletown if the right person is chosen, Keddie said.

"It's worked in Bensalem because they chose people with law enforcement experience who proved they could do the job," he said.

All three public safety directors in Bensalem, Frank Friel, Steve Moran and current director Fred Harran, were former cops with many years on the job.

Bensalem is the only area municipality with a public safety director. Council president Joseph Szafran said the system has worked well.

"I think it makes sense to have police, fire, rescue and all that under one command," he said. "I think the guy we have now [Harran] is a cop's cop and understands that side, but also knows the administrative side and can make decisions based on everything and not just the fact he used to be a cop."

Falls recently switched back to police chief after years with a public safety director. The current board feels it's better to have someone less susceptible to political whims, said Falls supervisors Chairman Bob Harvie.

"A police chief's job is hard enough without that entering in," he said.

A statement released by the police union through Keddie said "the PBA strongly believes the appointee [as public safety director] should be of a well-rounded law enforcement background that is well versed and knowledgeable in all aspects of police work. The PBA also hopes the Board of Supervisors can make this decision based on standards and qualifications and not solely a partisan appointment."

It continues: "The PBA would also like to offer to the Board of Supervisors a member or members to volunteer their time during this selection process. A majority of the Board of Supervisors lacks law enforcement experience and knowledge themselves. The member[s] would offer to be an observer during the selection process and provide input only if requested by the Board of Supervisors. As always, the PBA will serve in the best interests of the community and its members and looks forward to working together with the Board of Supervisors during this transition."

McMonagle said the board would pick the best person for the job, and added the PBA caution against making a partisan appointment was insulting.

"We really don't need the PBA president admonishing us on doing something illegal, and I don't think you need police experience to be able to recognize someone who will do well in this position," he said.

"The statement was from the PBA and not just from me and was not intended to be insulting," responded Keddie. "I'm not saying all of them do it, but the history on this type of thing is that politicians tend to go to political reasons on why they choose one person over another, and we just want the focus to be in the right direction. We're not admonishing anybody. It's not a slap in the face."

McMonagle said the suggestion of having a PBA member sit in on the selection process for public safety director is probably not practical since almost the entire "top tier" of the department has applied for the job and it would be a conflict. It probably wouldn't make sense for a lower-ranking officer who has not applied, like a patrol officer, to sit in or participate in the process for selecting a PSD, McMonagle said.

"The offer is there, so either they want our opinion or they don't," Keddie responded. "We're offering to work together. If the supervisors don't want to work together, that is their choice." Chris English can be reached at 215-949-4193 or .