

MIDDLETOWN

Town advertising public safety director job

Eight internal applicants have applied for the public safety director job that would open after Police Chief Frank McKenna retires Jan. 31.

By CHRIS ENGLISH
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Middletown has advertised for a director of public safety to replace Police Chief Frank McKenna when he retires Jan. 31 after 51 years on the force, the last 20 as chief.

Supervisors Chairman Robert McMonagle said a majority of the board, including him, favors the shift from a chief to a public safety director. The most frequently heard criticism of a director is that the position brings politics too much into the process. Supervisors Jasper Caro and George Leonhauser agree with that stance and oppose the switch. Middletown has never had a public safety director.

"A PSD is too political," Leonhauser, a former Middletown cop, said at a recent meeting. "We need someone in there who is not beholden to anyone."

Nevertheless, McMonagle said a notice has been posted inside the township municipal center seeking internal applicants for the director's job. McMonagle also said he believes the notice has been sent to some law enforcement Web sites for advertisement for outside candidates.

Caro asked at a recent meeting why the director position is being advertised when the board hadn't voted to change from chief to a director. McMonagle said he knew the board had already reached "consensus" to switch and that it was within township Manager Ray Stepnoski's power to start the process for hiring a new employee.

However, a formal vote on switching from chief to public safety director is scheduled for the Sept. 23 meeting, McMonagle said. Eight internal applicants have applied, he added, but wouldn't disclose their names.

Bensalem is the only area municipality with a public safety director.

Falls had one for several years before recently switching back to a police chief. The move to switch back started when Public Safety Director Neil Harkins indicated he was leaving to take another job and the Falls supervisors felt the change might induce him to stay. Harkins ended up leaving anyway, but Falls supervisors' chairman Bob Harvie said the current board just feels the police chief position is better.

"I wasn't on the board when they went with public safety director and I never really liked it," said Harvie. "When the issue with Neil Harkins came up, we figured this was a chance to recreate the chief of police position. I think it lends more stability to the department and takes it out of the realm of politics. A police chief's job is hard enough without politics entering in."

According to the Middletown notice, the new public safety director "will manage all township police and fire marshal operations in addition to serving as liaison to four local fire companies and one rescue squad."

It continues: "Prospective candidates will hold a bachelor's degree from an accredited college/university and have at least 10 years experience in law enforcement & emergency services [municipal, military, homeland security or private sector], with progressively increasing responsibility. A master's degree is strongly preferred and can offset some of the experience requirement."

Unlike police chiefs, who have strong protections against being fired under the police tenure act, public safety directors serve at the pleasure of the governing body. They also have supervisory powers not only over police but also fire and other emergency services.

McMonagle and Supervisor Chuck Thompson said the "political" objections to a public safety director are exaggerated.

"Any position is subject to politics," said McMonagle. "The best part about that is elected officials are more subject to politics than anyone else, so if we were to make some sort of

biased or patronage type hire, that would be exposed and we'd be voted out in the next election, or at least I would hope so."

The Courier Times was unsuccessful in its attempts to reach Supervisor Kathy Heuer for comment, though McMonagle includes her in his "consensus" for a switch in positions.

While emphasizing he has great respect for McKenna, Thompson said a public safety director would be more responsive to the board of supervisors. As an example, he said the supervisors' request for more stringent enforcement of regulations against excessively loud motorcycles has not been adequately addressed under McKenna's leadership.

McKenna has declined to comment on that claim, but previously stated the police chief position has always worked well in Middletown and there was no need for a change.

Lt. James Kane, second in command in the department along with Lt. Patrick McGinty, declined to comment on the apparent switch or say whether he had applied for the job. The Courier Times was unsuccessful in its attempts to reach McGinty for comment.

Det. Dale Keddie, president of the Middletown police union, said union members are prohibited from speaking with the media on this kind of issue without a majority vote of the union. Keddie said the public safety director issue will probably be discussed at a union meeting Monday and he might have a comment after that.

McMonagle initially suggested a scenario under which the public safety director position would switch back to a police chief after 18 months if the person hired was working out. That would have given the supervisors the ability to change without being "locked in" to a police chief hired immediately after McKenna leaves, he said.

However, McMonagle said he now favors staying with a public safety director.

"I trotted out the idea of switching back because I thought there would be hesitation to apply for a public safety director position, but based on the eight applications we've already received, that doesn't seem to be the case," he said.

McMonagle added: "I've come around to the concept that a police chief is really an outdated idea and a relic of the Dark Ages. In a post-Sept. 11 era and the greater focus on emergency management, I don't think you need various emergency service operations bumping into each other under different commands. I think there needs to be a single point of command."

Thompson also said he favors staying with a safety director.

"If this works well, and I think it will, I don't see why we would ever want to go back," he said.

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