

New board will pick a new police chief

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middletown

The agreement approved Tuesday night should keep the police chief issue out of court and avoid more legal costs for the township.

A new board of supervisors that takes office next month will select Middletown's new police chief, according to an agreement approved by the board at Tuesday night's meeting.

The agreement resolves a dispute between the present board majority and members of the incoming board over the police chief issue. Republican supervisors-elect Patrick Mallon and Drew Kreiling had sought an injunction preventing the board from passing an ordinance changing from a public safety director system back to police chief and naming a new chief this year.

Bucks County Judge Clyde Waite denied the injunction at a Monday hearing but also cautioned the present board that naming a new police chief could be seen as "binding" the incoming board and could subject the township to more legal costs and "turmoil."

By approving the agreement Tuesday night, most supervisors indicated they agreed with Waite that it's best to let the new board pick a police chief. The agreement, which must be signed by Waite, was approved 4-1 with supervisors Chuck Thompson, Kathy Heuer, George Leonhauser and Jasper Caro voting to approve. Robert McMonagle was the only dissenter.

Solicitor Mike Savona said it's very unlikely Waite will not sign the agreement. It spells out that township officials will conduct a search for both inside and outside candidates for police chief. The ordinance switching from public safety director to police chief will not become effective until a chief is actually appointed. Until then, the township will remain under the public safety director system and acting PSD Patrick McGinty will remain in that position.

Thompson, McMonagle and Heuer had said several weeks ago they wanted to change over to police chief and appoint McGinty the chief before the new board took office. Thompson and Heuer gradually shifted from that position, especially after hearing Waite's comments at Monday's hearing.

"I think the judge made a very cogent argument and, on reflection, I agreed with him," said Thompson. "I think this agreement is a good compromise. We believed and still believe that the best way to prepare for the 21st Century was to have a director of public safety oversee all the emergency services in the township. Forging ahead to protect this position, however, would conceivably lead to more turmoil, which would not be in the best interests of the residents of Middletown."

In voting against the agreement, McMonagle criticized Mallon and Kreiling for using the law "not as a shield but as a weapon."

Mallon said he's happy that the issue has been resolved.

"I think it's a win-win for everyone, especially for the voters of Middletown who, by electing us, indicated they wanted us to pick a new police chief," he said. "I applaud Mr. Thompson and Mrs. Heuer for taking the high road. We will put together a process, create a list of viable candidates and pick the one most capable of leading the police department."

McGinty, who was promoted from lieutenant to acting public safety director in January after the board could not find a permanent PSD, said he would apply for the police chief's job.

"I stand ready to serve the township in whatever way the present board or new board deems necessary," he said. "As acting public safety director, I have always acted in the best interests of township residents, just as I

have in all my 35 years as a police officer in this township."

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