

MIDDLETOWN

Township fields rumors over flags and funeral

By **CHRIS ENGLISH**
STAFF WRITER

In a memo to all Middletown employees, township Manager Raymond Stepnoski has tried to dispel what he called rumors that have surfaced in the aftermath of the death of police Officer Chris Jones.

Jones was killed Thursday in an accident after stopping a motorist for speeding on the Route 1 Superhighway.

One rumor is that Stepnoski ordered the American flag at the township municipal center, which had been lowered to half-staff Friday morning, back up to the top of the pole.

Another is that the township supervisors voted 3-2 to not pay for Jones' funeral expenses.

In the memo, Stepnoski said the American flag has remained at halfstaff since Friday morning. A township employee who asked not to be identified verified that.

"During the evening of January 29, it appears someone had the moral fortitude to lower the township's American flag," said Stepnoski's memo. "The flag remained and remains lowered. By requirement of state law, I contacted Gov. Rendell's office and requested an order to lower both the Pennsylvania and American flag. Gov. Rendell signed an order to only lower the Pennsylvania flag and his staff explained that he (would only order an) American flag lowering (for the death of) Pennsylvania state officials."

There is no Pennsylvania flag at the municipal center, said supervisors Chairman Chuck Thompson.

"The (American) flag issue is a non-issue," added acting Public Safety Director Patrick McGinty. "It hasn't moved from half-staff since it was put there."

Stepnoski also tried to clear up what he called misinformation spread about the payment of Jones' funeral expenses.

"It has been rumored that the supervisors voted 3-2 not to assume the costs of Jones' funeral," Stepnoski's memo said. "First, it would have been illegal to have such a vote without public notice and a public hearing. No such vote occurred. There was not even a cursory discussion of this with the board of supervisors. It appears that supervisor (George) Leonhauser reached out to supervisor Thompson and asked that the township bear the costs of the funeral. Somehow, supervisor Thompson's effort to explain to supervisor Leonhauser that there is reason for comfort that Mrs. Jones will be protected financially in the immediate and longterm was misinterpreted to suggest the township would not pick up funeral costs."

"Let's be clear here," the memo continued. "There are funeral costs that are being donated (example: catering, memorial stone) and there are funeral costs that will be directly paid for by virtue of the township's death benefit policies. After all arrangements have been finalized and all incurred costs tallied, all township supervisors have given me their commitment that Mrs. Jones' need not worry about funeral costs. A majority of my time the last couple of days has been to ensure that there would be a smooth transition of benefits to the family."

According to Thompson and the township police contract, Jones' widow, Suzanne, will receive a \$130,000 life insurance payment and \$3,000 for funeral expenses. She also will receive Jones' annual salary of \$74,998 every year as long as she lives, unless she remarries.

Suzanne Jones also will receive full medical benefits for life, unless she remarries, according to the contract. Her three children will get full medical coverage until age 18, or until age 23 if they're in college.

Thompson reiterated he likely will vote for the township to pick up whatever funeral expenses might be left over, and said it was unfortunate some people have decided to spread rumors.

"It's despicable that they are using this tragedy, this death of a courageous police officer, apparently for political purposes," he said. "It makes me angry they would stoop that low."

Leonhauser declined to comment for this story, but said he would have something to say after

Jones' funeral Thursday.

"I don't want to take attention away from that," he said.

The newspaper was unsuccessful in reaching Officer Steve Forman, the current township police union president, for comment.

In the memo, Stepnoski also addressed a planned visit by Thompson and fellow Supervisors Robert McMonagle and Kathy Heuer and Bucks County Commissioner Diane Marseglia, a former township supervisor, to the Jones' home to pay their respects.

"The 3 township supervisors and Commissioner Marseglia did coordinate their visit to the Jones' home with the police department," Stepnoski said. "While the visit was not completed as planned, it was not an impetuous and unplanned visit."

He said township officials plan to posthumously promote Jones to detective.

"It is my belief that such a promotion will be made unless the PBA (police union) asks that it not," Stepnoski's memo said.

"In closing, I would welcome all staff to come directly to my office to obtain clear and exact information on the various rumors and stories that will inevitably continue to arise as a result of this tragedy," the memo said. "Further, as this is the first time Middletown has had to deal with such a tragedy, there is bound to be some confusion and slowness to the steps we take; if anyone feels we have missed something or are proceeding incorrectly, I encourage you to bring it directly to my attention. My sincere condolences are extended to all of the employees, and especially our officers, as they struggle to cope and survive the greatest loss in the department's history."