

## Chief concern

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### Police and politics

The incoming board of supervisors - chosen by Middletown voters - should select a new police chief.

People who've been voted out of office should abide by voters' wishes and go gently into the night.

We have in mind the three Democrats who've been running things in Middletown and who will be supplanted by a new Republican majority on the board of supervisors come January. Despite voters' clear desire for a change in leadership the outgoing majority intends to make their mark by naming a new police chief.

Police departments are the biggest draw on any municipal budget. And so hiring a chief is among the most critical decisions local government officials can make. The right choice can produce a harmonious relationship between chief and elected leaders with a variety of payoffs, including cost savings. The wrong choice can make for a very bumpy, perhaps a very costly situation. (Long-term residents might recall the police chief wars in Bensalem that ran up millions in legal expenses.)

That's why in our view the incoming majority on the board of supervisors should make the hire since the new chief will be working closely with the new board. But there's an even better reason why the old board should pass on the decision: Voters have spoken.

"It's a power play thing," Supervisor George Leonhauser said. Added Supervisor-elect Pat Mallon, "+ the voters have indicated loud and clear that they have no confidence in the thinking of the present board."

Leonhauser and Mallon will be in the Republican majority that takes control of township government come January. Over and above the logic implicit in the above comments, Leonhauser makes this point: Outgoing Democrats Chuck Thompson and Kathy Heuer don't represent the will of the people because neither was elected to their seats on the board - they were appointed. When Thompson did go before voters, he was rejected. Heuer chose not to run for election.

Regardless, both lame-duck supervisors in alliance with Supervisor Robert McMonagle, who will remain on the board, said they intend to appoint Patrick McGinty, acting public safety director, as the new police chief.

There's no reason to think McGinty can't do the job. He's been at it on an interim basis for about a year now. And McGinty also gets good marks from the township's manager.

But to give McGinty the job the supervisors must abolish the position of public safety director, which requires a college degree, and resurrect the position of police chief. The Democrats said they intend to do that even though they eliminated the position of police chief in favor of a public safety director just a year ago. The primary difference between the two is that a public safety director isn't protected by the Police Tenure Act and, therefore, serves at the pleasure of the board.

What that means is that a chief is less susceptible to political meddling because it's hard to fire a chief. That could be a good thing. Not so good: A chief also could remain stubbornly resistant to the direction elected leaders want to go - with voters' blessings.

It is troubling that the outgoing majority supervisors are so quickly abandoning a position they argued was key to improving a department that has its share of problems. Indeed, \$1.1 million in police overtime in 2008 is indicative of a department in need of strong oversight.

In our view, deciding who provides that oversight should be the province of the new board, which will have to work closely with whoever gets the job.

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