

Supervisors debate hiring patrol officers

11 Apr 2010 — Bucks County Courier Times

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Hiring new officers who have been through the academy will save money while not sacrificing quality, the township manager said.

With all the talk about "boots on the ground," audience members might have thought they were at a Pentagon press briefing about combat operations in Iraq or Afghanistan.

But the topic at a recent Middletown supervisors meeting wasn't the military. In this case, boots on the ground meant cops on the street and how to best go about hiring four new patrol officers to replenish the township's police ranks.

The debate centered on whether to hire the new officers based strictly on a rankings list, which is a combination of candidates' scores on a Bucks County Police Chiefs Association test and their ratings in oral interviews before a panel of Middletown police sergeants.

Rather than go strictly by the rankings, acting Public Safety Director Patrick McGinty said he is also giving some consideration to whether a candidate already has gone through the police academy.

Using that criteria, McGinty told the supervisors he has hired two new officers who were ranked high and also have been through the academy.

Wayne George, a part-time officer in Newtown and New Hope, will start as a full-time patrol officer in Middletown Monday. McGinty said he didn't want to name the other officer he hired until the person passes a physical and psychological exam administered by the township.

McGinty and township Manager Ray Stepnoski will hold off on hiring the other two officers because of concerns expressed by Supervisor George Leonhauser. The former township detective believes the officers should be hired strictly by the rankings with no consideration of whether they have been through the academy.

"We shouldn't be discriminating against those candidates who are not certified (haven't been through the academy)," said Leonhauser. "We're an equal opportunity employer. The highest scores should prevail whether a candidate is certified yet or not."

He said he isn't taking that stance because he favors a particular candidate who hasn't been through the academy. "I have no horse in the race," Leonhauser said.

Solicitor Joe Pizzo is researching whether the township must hire officers strictly according to their rankings and should have an opinion soon, township officials indicated.

Board member Robert McMonagle told Leonhauser he should leave police hiring decisions up to McGinty and Stepnoski.

"Let the managers manage," McMonagle said.

He also pointed out that hiring candidates who already have been through the academy is much more cost effective for the township.

If Middletown hires a candidate who has not been through the academy, the township must pay the candidate an annual salary of \$47,332 during the five or six months the candidate is attending the academy and not actually working for the township. The starting annual salary for an officer who has been through the academy is \$53,942 this year.

Hiring someone who has been certified also spares the township of paying a candidate's police academy tuition of about \$5,000, McGinty pointed out.

"My concern is getting boots on the ground," he said, referring to the fact that officers who have been through the academy can go right to work.

Even though George will spend up to four months with a training officer, he can still make arrests and perform all the normal functions of a cop, McGinty said.

Stepnoski said the rankings of all 14 candidates being considered by the township are fairly close to each other, and giving some preference to a candidate who has been through the academy wouldn't sacrifice quality.

"We're seeing a quality of candidates we've never seen before," he said. "All the candidates on the list being considered are in the upper echelon of test scores."

George ranked No. 2 on the list and the other candidate offered a job was fifth or sixth, said McGinty.

If allowed, McGinty said his plan is to offer one of the remaining jobs to the top candidate on the rankings list, even though that candidate has not been through the academy. He plans to offer the fourth job to someone who has been through the academy.

McGinty said he was surprised that his hiring decisions are being questioned in public. Leonhauser called McGinty to the podium during the April 5 meeting to question him about the recent hires.

"It's the first time I can remember a board of supervisors doing that," said McGinty, who has been a Middletown cop since 1974.

The four openings were created when officer Chris Jones was killed in an accident while making a stop last year, officer Arthur Laycock retired and officer Michael Rosenstein and Detective Brian McDonough were both granted disability pensions. McGinty said he plans to promote someone from within the department to replace McDonough on the detective squad once all four patrol officers are hired.

Jones was posthumously promoted to detective.

Chris English can be reached at 215-949-4193 or cenglish@phillyBurbs.com.

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