

# Washington Borough, township agree to share a single police force

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WASHINGTON | After years of discussion, borough and Washington Township officials agreed Wednesday to combine their police departments into one, 24-officer force.

For the better part of two hours of a joint meeting, borough council and township committee members discussed the language of the shared-service agreement that would essentially disband the borough department and incorporate those officers into the township's force.

But there seemed to be little to suggest the measure would not go through.

"I think we're coming across an historic day here," township Mayor Samir Elbassiouny said. "I think we have an opportunity to set a precedent."

Borough council was unanimous in favor of the merger. Two out of the five township committeemen -- R.J. Strunk and Barry Mueller -- provided the only votes against it.

The official start of the dual department is targeted for Aug. 1, pending confirmation of a state grant to assist with the implementation.

Borough Manager Richard Phelan said Wednesday he had heard positive news regarding the grant from the state Department of Community Affairs but nothing official yet. Both governments agreed they would need to know the amount of the grant by June 15, or the target start date might need to be pushed back.

Portions of the discussion among municipal officials centered on how sick time among borough officers would be paid for and how the borough would be affected if another municipality joined the township's department.

Officials approved the agreement with only small amendments.

The contract joining the departments is for seven years with the option to renew for an additional five, according to borough officials.

The new department will use the township's police headquarters on the lower level of its Route 31 municipal building that opened last fall. Each department has 13 officers. Two officers are expected to retire soon, officials have said.

Coverage of the borough and township will be handled by four squads, each made up of a sergeant and three officers, township Police Chief James McDonald has said.

Both municipalities expect to save \$130,000 in the first year of the agreement and \$106,000 in the second. The third year would save \$50,000 while \$75,000 is expected to be saved in the fourth and fifth years.

Each year of the agreement, the borough will pay a base service fee and 50 percent of any cost increase, officials have said. For the remainder of this year, the borough will pay about \$140,000 a month for the base. In 2010 and beyond, the borough would pay a base fee of about \$1.7 million in quarterly payments.

Either municipality would be able to cancel the agreement after two years if services are unsatisfactory, provided the terminating town gives a year's notice.

Early in Wednesday's meeting, Elbassiouny said the state already has made the push for municipalities to combine services, and such a merger may have been forced eventually.

"This way, at least we're doing it on our own terms," he said.

"Hear, hear," borough Mayor Scott McDonald agreed.