

The Patriot-News

Editorial - POLICE VOTE

New Cumberland isn't joining, but that shouldn't kill the idea

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New Cumberland Borough Council tiptoed to the water's edge but couldn't dive into the future by joining a regional police department.

Though the issues that prompted those in the 4-3 council vote to oppose it are legitimate, we think it's unfortunate the borough won't be joining Lemoyne and Wormleysburg in West Shore Regional Police.

Opponents noted that after New Cumberland's eight officers were joined with West Shore's 12, the borough would be paying half of the operating costs and would have the largest population, but would have the same number of votes on the governing police commission as Lemoyne and Wormleysburg.

The biggest complicating factor, however, appeared to be that New Cumberland's police contract expires at the end of the year. The police union could contest the merger as a contract violation, raising the specter of costly litigation.

Council President John R. Murray, the key swing vote, found himself in the unusual position of supporting a merger but having to change his previous votes on preliminary matters, out of concern for litigation at a time when the borough is facing some expensive infrastructure needs.

While some of the issues in the agreement with Lemoyne and Wormleysburg might have been addressed through continued negotiations, Murray said the pending expiration of the police contract Dec. 31 raised time constraints that precluded further talks. Murray says he still favors regional police services, and we'd urge him and the rest of council not to close the door on this concept. It also should consider contract language addressing this future possibility in negotiations with the police union on a new contract.

If anything, this merger was too small and there are broader possibilities across the greater West Shore area.

We appreciate the exasperation of Councilman Terry Stoner, a supporter of the merger and a veteran municipal official who has seen the borough try and fail on this front several times in recent years. But we disagree with, and ask him to reconsider, his comment that "the door is now closed forever."

The underlying issues aren't going to go away for small communities such as New Cumberland, where the largest line item in the \$4.8 million annual budget is \$800,000 for police services. Like many other small boroughs, there is no room for growth to expand the tax base to meet the inevitable increases in salaries, benefits and equipment.

At some point, New Cumberland residents and others in similar-sized communities are going to have one of two choices: pay sharply higher taxes or reduce other services to support a borough police force, or seek greater economies of scale -- both in terms of finances and services -- through a regional force.

Stoner, Murray and other supporters should soldier on and view this as losing a battle but not the war. It's only a matter of time before fiscal realities trump provincialism.