

## Merging police departments would mean joining unions, leadership

Whitestown officials hope state funds will help study consolidation

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WHITESTOWN — Officials are looking to the state for money to further study the possibility of consolidating the town's five police departments.

The town and its four villages – New York Mills, Oriskany, Yorkville and Whitesboro – applied for a \$50,000 state grant earlier this month to research questions raised through last year's study conducted by the Center for Governmental Research in Albany.

The study released in March 2008 said that consolidating the town's five departments would be the most complex action of its kind in state history and revealed that such a move could save taxpayers as much as \$226,000.

Four of the five departments are located within a 2-mile radius of each other.

"We owe it to the public to consider this," Whitesboro Mayor Richard Pugh said. "If there're some monies out there to help us study this without burdening our taxpayers, I think that's the way to do it."

A steering committee made up of 10 town and village officials – including Whitestown Supervisor Charles Gibbs and all four village mayors – said the study raised a number of new concerns that the grant would allow them to study including:

- How to merge the multiple labor unions representing the staff of the five forces.
- How to consolidate the departments' command structure.
- How to best provide services to the Village of New York Mills since it's situated in both the towns of Whitestown and New Hartford.

### Mixed opinions

Officials estimate a study of those items would take nine months to a year.

But not all leaders agreed the study was worthwhile.

Yorkville Mayor Bruno Petruccione said the village's current police staffing is ideal, and he would not be in favor of the consolidation, regardless of what a new study might report.

"Consolidation is a bunch of baloney," Petruccione said. "The grant is applied for, but it's a waste of money."

Many officials stressed that a consolidation of the departments may not be best for residents, noting a less personable relationship between residents and officers.

Whitestown Police Chief Donald Wolanin said he favored more sharing of resources between the current departments, which could provide cost savings.

"We already help each other all the time sharing ideas, radio systems and instructors. I'd like to see more of that," Wolanin said.

### Possible savings

While most of the committee's new concerns are related to the legal technicalities of restructuring the forces, officials said they still had reservations about some of the basic consolidation aspects, such as staff reductions.

As of 2006 when the study was conducted, the five departments employed a total of 52 officers combined.

But models suggested in the study would reduce staffing to between 32 and 41 officers. At 32 total officers, the study predicted a \$226,000 savings. At 41 officers, the study predicted an \$18,000 savings.

"I don't think any full-time people should lose their positions," Gibbs said. "Still with the economics today, we're not going to be able to afford to have

five police departments in town.”

#### **‘Too many’ officers?**

John Gadziala, a Whitesboro resident, said based on the police presence he’s seen in the village, he’d be in favor of consolidation.

“Sometimes, maybe there’s too many of them around,” Gadziala said. “Then you’ve also got the county and the state cops, too.”

But officials acknowledged that a consolidation of all five departments ultimately might not be possible since residents in each municipality would have to agree to the measure.

The new grant would also allow for the study of a contingency plan in the event that different combinations of the departments decide to merge.

While there isn’t much consensus on what the end result should be, officials agreed their primary concern is making sure the residents maintain adequate police protection.

“Obviously, when you reduce staff, you increase the workloads of the remaining staff,” New York Mills Mayor Robert Maciol said. “We need professional consulting to understand how to keep everyone safe.”

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