

## Free PA State Police Costs Everyone

By Gerald Cross

It's a dirty little secret of Pennsylvania local government.

Half of the Commonwealth's municipalities do not pay for police protection, according to a recent Associated Press story. Instead, they receive those services for free from the Pennsylvania State Police. One estimate for the cost of that so-called free police coverage was pegged at \$540 million in 2012, which was more than half of the PSP's annual budget.

The situation is another example of the Commonwealth's fragmented local government system. In Pennsylvania, all 2,561 municipalities are authorized to establish — but required to pay for — a full range of local government services within their boundaries, from public safety to public works. However, there is no direct requirement to provide local police. Absent a local police department, municipalities can receive free coverage from the PSP.

This results in absurd contrasts. For instance, Pennsylvania mandates that communities of more than 5,000 people provide curbside recycling, but there is no requirement that municipalities with tens of thousands of people, heavily trafficked roads, high-value homes, and high-end retail areas pay for the basic service of public safety for their residents, businesses and shoppers.

Local police are expensive. In communities with local police departments, the cost is often the largest annual expenditure. Pennsylvania Economy League research shows that the total tax revenue in some cities has declined to the point that it fails to cover the escalating cost of services like police. This can lead municipalities to cut staff in their police departments; replace full-time officers with less expensive, but less effective, part-timers; or even eliminate their local police protection.

For densely populated urban areas, local police are not viewed as optional even though they are not directly required by statute. Imagine the chaos if cities like Pittsburgh, Reading, Harrisburg, Johnstown, Altoona or Scranton decided to save money by jettisoning their local police — a threat that more than one distressed city mayor has only half-jokingly muttered.

There are consequences for allowing municipalities to forgo local police. For example, officers in one municipality can be called out to incidents in neighboring towns that do not have local police. One city in the central part of the state complained that its officers were continually called to incidents at the shopping center in an adjacent township. As a result, not only do those city residents subsidize the PSP service used by their neighbors through taxes and fees, they are also subsidizing the service level with their own already stretched-thin local officers.

Crime flows to where police protection is sparse. At a PEL heroin abuse forum, a Northeast Pennsylvania borough police chief expressed frustration with drug dealers who locate in bordering municipalities without police departments. These dealers sell to residents of his borough, resulting in a spike of drug-related crime. The drug dealers, he said, are well aware that there are no local police where they live so it's a perfect place for them to set up shop and avoid arrest.

Municipalities without the burden of paying for local police have a greater ability to keep taxes lower and remain financially healthier. Municipal officials often justify their decision by claiming that local police are too expensive or not needed because the population is so low. However, many large, wealthy communities in counties like Westmoreland, Chester, Delaware and Lehigh have the financial means but simply refuse to provide local police services. Meanwhile, residents might be surprised to learn of the resulting gaps in police protection. While PSP will respond to major incidents, they are not designed to handle the gamut of complaints, enforcement of local ordinances and more that are the backbone of local police services.

Mandating that all 2,561 municipalities have their own police department is unrealistic. One alternative is to require payment for PSP services. A more comprehensive and long-term, albeit more complicated, option is to create a mechanism for local government tax-base sharing to more effectively deliver all types of critical services on a regional level. One thing is clear: a wide-ranging discussion of how local governments in Pennsylvania provide services is long overdue.

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