

Amity reverses vote to furlough 1 police officer

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AMITY — Township supervisors voted 3-1 Wednesday night to reverse a July 18 vote to furlough a police officer.

Supervisor Richard L. Gokey was absent from the meeting.

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The board told Police Chief Kent A. Shuebrook to make \$100,000 worth of adjustments to the 2013 police department budget in order to retain all 12 officers in the department and avoid a deficit; an additional \$50,000 was “found” on Aug. 1, according to information presented at the meeting.

More than 100 residents filled the township meeting room asking for a millage increase in 2013 to keep the 12 officers, specifically officer John Coe, who would be furloughed since he is the department’s most recent hire. The furlough would have been effective Sept. 1.

The board met in executive session July 18 to determine which officer to furlough but did not announce a decision.

“Amity residents are not going to stand for that (furloughing officers),” said Susan Smolinsky, adding residents would be willing to pay an additional \$2.50 in taxes to keep the officer.

“I don’t have a problem with that,” said Smolinsky. “Make things public and let us come here to decide.”

Board Chairman Robert R. Yanos said there are rarely more than three to five residents at supervisors’ meetings.

Prior to the vote on Aug. 1, Supervisor Kimberly J. McGrath asked residents if they were “interested in raising the millage” to help pay the township’s \$1 million debt on Amity Community Park and renovations to the township building.

Residents shouted “no, we’re only interested in safety.”

McGrath said she had received only one phone call asking for a millage increase to keep an officer.

She said all other phone calls asked her not to raise taxes.

Supervisor Terry L. Jones said he has received the opposite response.

“I spoke to only two out of 60 or 70 who had an issue with taxes being raised,” said Jones. “Twenty-five to \$30 per household to keep in line with expenses and I think everyone would do that. I know I would. The economy does not allow you to operate without raising taxes and to say that we won’t ever raise taxes is ridiculous.”

“Revenues are flat,” said Yanos. “Even if the police took a zero percent increase, that line would still go up and would get to a point that is unmanageable. Furloughing one officer is not going to solve this.”

Yanos said the board’s 3-2 vote on July 18 was based on the preliminary 2013 budget deficit estimate of \$153,000 and a 2017 deficit of \$380,000, for a total deficit of \$1.5 million by 2017 — due to the police salary increase of 3.5 percent annually for three years and retroactive to Jan. 1, which was negotiated in the most recent contract.

Previously, Yanos, McGrath, and Gokey voted to furlough with the contention that it is the board’s responsibility not to raise taxes, a belief Yanos and McGrath said has never been disputed by township residents.

“The township’s tax is the residents’ service,” said Supervisor Paul R. Weller. “I don’t want to pay more taxes but I don’t want to see services decrease. Our responsibility includes scrutinizing all of it — more than just the police department. I didn’t want to do this, but many elderly can’t afford to pay. They don’t have anymore to give. Maybe we’ll have to make a cut somewhere else during budget talks.”

Joseph M. Brown, president of the Berks County Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 71, said he was there to reverse the “wrong that has been done to a member of the Amity Township Police Department and to the community by the vote on July 18 to lay off an officer from 12 to 11 and from an all-time high of 15 to 11.”

Brown said John Coe, who has been on the force since 2009, has a 14-month-old son, a 2-year-old daughter, and he and his wife had just sold their house to buy a larger house before the vote was made to eliminate a police department position.

Coe previously served with the Berks County Sheriff’s Department, was a firearms instructor, and is an Iraq War veteran. He was awarded the Purple Heart.

“This is the man you are trying to ruin the life of,” said Brown. “You call him expendable; I call him a hero. You don’t need to be ruining his life; you need to be thanking him for his service to his country.

“They want you to believe this is about economics, but it is about vindication,” Brown added, referring to the supervisors.

Brown said the officers attempted to negotiate a contract in 2011 with a zero percent increase, but the board opposed it and instead asked the police to change their medical benefits, which the officers also attempted to negotiate.

“You didn’t say that built into the 2012 contract was already the 3.5 percent increase,” said Brown. “You inflated your health care costs by \$30,000 to make it look like the police officers were costing you another \$30,000.”

“You were upset at the June 6 Board of Supervisors meeting with the arbitration result,” said Brown. “You lost and now you want to ruin this man’s life. It’s sour grapes over losing your arbitration.”

Brown said 2012 real estate tax revenue of \$800,000, insurance dividends of \$60,000, and \$160,000 savings from a recent bond refinance should provide the necessary revenue to avoid a \$153,000 deficit next year.

Township solicitor Brian F. Boland said the facts of the arbitration are that the police contract offer was for a zero percent increase the first year, but with subsequent increases of 3, 3, and 4 percent over the ensuing three years.

“It was higher than what you ended up receiving,” said Boland. “It wasn’t a one year offer — it was 4 to 5 years, and you had 18 things you guys were looking for. And then with the arbitrator there were 16 things that included 120 hours of comp time, an officer’s bill of rights with 14 items, additional sick time to add up to 100 days, tuition reimbursement of 100 percent for grades C and above, paid travel time, pay for time they’re at training, increased sick days from seven up to 96 hours and add in house members.”

Boland said the police also wouldn’t allow the township to shop for cheaper insurance to save money.

The board unanimously approved fire truck traffic interrupters at a cost of \$13,000 for the Route 422 intersections at Limekiln and Monocacy Creek Road.

It tabled a decision on an estimated \$18,000 repair or replacement cost for the township building’s phone system, which was damaged when it was recently struck by lightning.

Information from the News of Southern Berks, www.berksmontnews.com