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In Amity, show of force for cop

Residents turn out to chastise township for wanting to lay off officer with family

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Officer John Coe was looking to settle down.

After serving in Iraq with the Marine Corps and getting a Purple Heart, Coe started working as a junior officer for the Amity Township police department in 2009.

Coe, now 31, and his wife, Georgiana, had two children, a 14-month-old son and a 2-month-old daughter, and sold their house in July to look for a larger home for their family.

A few days later their world turned upside down.

Police Chief Kent A. Shuebrook called Coe after the July 18 supervisors meeting to let him know his job was in jeopardy.

The supervisors had just voted 3-2 to lay off a police officer by Sept. 1, citing financial issues.

As the newest member on the force, Coe knew he'd be the one without a job.

Township residents decided to do something about it.

About 125 people packed the meeting room of the Amity Township municipal building Wednesday in support of Coe and the police department, which has been slowly losing manpower since Shuebrook was hired as chief in 2009.

After two hours of discussion, the supervisors reversed the previous decision with a 3-1 vote. Chairman Robert R. Yanos voted no and Supervisor Richard Gockey was absent.

Coe said he was relieved and grateful to residents.

"We got to see the township residents that it is our duty to protect come out and support us tonight," he said after the meeting. "They do care about the township and the police."

Many of the residents said they would not mind seeing their taxes increased if it means keeping Coe employed and the police department adequately staffed.

"These police officers put their lives on the line for all of us every day," Susan Smolinsky said. "With the economy the way it is, people are losing jobs and crime is increasing. And while crime is increasing, you are decreasing our protection."

Supervisor Paul Weller said he agreed with increasing taxes since he doesn't want to see the township's services dwindle further. He and Terry Jones voted against the layoff at the July 18 meeting.

"I understand I can't keep getting the level of service I've gotten for all these years for the same dollar amount, especially in a four-year lousy economy," Weller said.

Resident Brian Conrad suggested collecting donations to help support the department.

"It'd be worth it to me and maybe others feel that way, too," he said.

Joseph M. Brown, president of the Berks County Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 71, challenged the supervisors, saying the decision was retaliation for the police winning a contract arbitration hearing earlier this year.

"The only thing this looks like is sour grapes," Brown said. "We will not go away and let this injustice be done to a man who has done this much for his community and his country."

Yanos said the original decision to eliminate a position was just one step toward trying to avoid projected deficits in upcoming years.

"I feel personally the sooner you make cuts, the less harsh they'll be," Yanos said.

For the time being, Coe maintains his job and can begin house hunting again.

However the issue will be re-evaluated in the coming months as the supervisors review the budget for 2013.

"I'm relieved for him," Shuebrook said. "But even though this changed tonight, it doesn't have these cops feeling any better."

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Amity Township resident Susan Smolinsky speaks her mind to township supervisors over the planned layoff of one officer.



Amity Township Police Officer John Coe, the officer who was likely to be laid off, at the meeting.