

Town of Ossining Police Decision – A Vision for the Future



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One of the most significant responsibilities local municipal officials have is to plan beyond the municipality's immediate future and to put into place the systems that will allow the community to thrive long after their own service is done. Often, that need for long-term vision is engulfed by the overwhelming needs of the present. Particularly, in times of an economic downturn, it is common for immediate needs to outweigh long term planning concerns due to the demands of day-to-day operations. Right now, local governments have an immediate responsibility to taxpayers to provide services that preserve the high quality of life in the most cost-effective and efficient manner.

On Tuesday, September 28, 2010, the Ossining Town Board made a historic decision to outsource police services by entering into a contract with the County of Westchester. The Town Board was at the same time analyzing a proposal from the Village of Ossining to provide similar police services. This decision was based on a long, public discussion. All documents were made available on the Town of Ossining's website at every stage of the process, and many constituents shared their opinions with the Town Board members.

The decision to partner with the County of Westchester was the result of many hours of deliberation, analysis, and extensive community outreach. We chose the county option because we felt it was the best fit for the needs of our municipality. It is also an opportunity to demonstrate how local governments can make decisions in challenging economic times that provide long-term benefits for taxpayers.

The Ossining Town Police Department serves the area of the Town of Ossining that is referred to as the "unincorporated area" or the "Town-Outside" the two villages. It is a portion of the Town that is in neither of the two incorporated villages, Ossining and Briarcliff Manor, all of which comprise the Town of Ossining.

The Town of Ossining has an excellent, progressive police department, noted for its exceptional community policing efforts. However, the Town realized several years ago that the cost of running a 17-member department in an area where there is very little crime was using a disproportional amount of taxpayer resources.

In an effort to address this concern, the Town worked with the governments of the Villages of Ossining and Briarcliff Manor on an 18-month study with ICMA, an international municipal consulting firm, which analyzed the costs of each entities separate police agency and recommended that the three departments merge. While that recommendation did not turn out to be a feasible option for political and jurisdictional reasons, the data provided in the analysis made it clear to the Town Board that we had to make a change for the betterment of our taxpayers.

The main responsibility of any local government is to provide for the health, safety, and welfare of its residents, in this case by providing the high level of community policing. Each of the two proposals before the Town Board would provide excellent policing to the impacted residents. Both proposals would also provide substantial tax savings for Town-Outside residents. The Town Board chose to work with the county because we determined that in the long term, consolidating back office operations, such as supervision, dispatching, and technology, made sense.

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In Westchester, the high fixed costs of operating dozens of small police departments has become an unsustainable burden on property tax payers. Westchester County will have existing Town of Ossining police officers operating out of a Town-owned police facility as a “precinct,” which is the best way to preserve the elements of local policing that Westchester residents enjoy and expect – the local police presence at community event, the friendly assistance, the officer at school dismissal. All of the Town’s community policing initiatives will be preserved under this merger with the County. The proposal provides that the Town of Ossining will contract to pay the County approximately \$2.1 million per year for police services, approximately \$900,000 less that the cost of the Town’s police department. The County will use 11 uniform officers and 1 detective to patrol the Town-Outside. The remaining members of the current Ossining Town Police department will be hired to fill existing vacancies in the County force, which would have been filled whether or not this arrangement occurred. Therefore, the arrangement does not cost County taxpayers or taxpayers in either of the two villages within the Town of Ossining any additional money.

Another factor that weighed heavily into our decision-making process was the feedback we received from community members, particularly those who would be impacted by the change. While there were differences of opinion, many more Town-Outside residents urged the Town Council to choose the County proposal. All elected officials are helped in their decision-making when interested citizens participate in the process. We had several community meetings, including two Town Hall meetings where the questions and opinions from residents helped to clarify our decision. We offer our thanks to all who shared their thoughts with us during the process.

This is a unique time in our history, as a municipality and as a county. We believe that the Town of Ossining’s decision will lead to many good things in neighboring municipalities. The opportunity and willingness to share between municipalities and the county has never been greater. The Town and Villages of Ossining, for example, are set to sign three new, updated Intermunicipal Agreements to save taxpayer dollars within the next few weeks. Other communities might wish to keep their own police departments, however, they can still look for ways to regionalize some operations, such as shared civilian dispatch of police and extraordinary emergency calls.

The Ossining Town Board would like to thank all who participated in this process, including Town of Ossining Police Chief Mark Busche, the Town of Ossining Police Benevolent Association, former Ossining Town Police Chief Kenneth Donato, the Villages of Ossining and Briarcliff Manor, Westchester County Department of Public Safety, Commissioner Longworth and his staff, the Westchester County Department of Public Safety Police Benevolent Association, and County Executive Rob Astorino, our County Legislator Bill Burton and the entire County Board of Legislators.

Now, the work of sorting out the details of the agreement begins. The Town of Ossining has taken the first step into a better future. We are resolved to make this new model for consolidated community policing a success. It is our hope and belief that other municipalities will follow this path to a better future for their citizens as well.