

Last year our governor and state legislature began cutting back on the funding that traditionally went to counties, cities, villages and townships. They promised that they would make grant money available to allow communities to facilitate more collaboration in order to save money. This year the State of Ohio set up a Local Government Innovation Fund to do just that. As a result the City of Canal Fulton and Lawrence Township are collaborating on a grant to fund a feasibility study for improved collaboration between the city and township police departments. This greater collaboration could even result in a complete merger of both departments.

Why do we need a feasibility study? At face value it seems obvious that combining police departments should result in improved service and lower costs. The purpose of the study would be to determine if this is true and, if so, find the best ways to improve services while lowering costs. There are a number of methods in Ohio law that can be used to merge our departments together. Deciding the best way to do this would be a primary focus of the study. The study may even recommend that a complete merger is not necessary and other ways to collaborate may be presented.

When we consider just one question, such as how this new collaboration would be funded, we realize that the community must be involved with this process. Currently the city police department is funded through income taxes, the township department through property taxes. Community meetings and surveys would be used to identify the fairest way for city and township residents to pay for police services.

We would also need to get input from our police officers. We have a very experienced and effective police department. Interim chief Doug Swartz recently informed us that our arrest rate per crime is still very high compared to other departments throughout the state. Better management of police operations through improved collaboration with Lawrence Township can only come through the involvement of our police officers. This would also be a part of a feasibility study.

We will know by this summer whether or not we will get this LGIF grant. Even if we do not get the grant, I believe both communities are ready to move forward.

Along with the Local Innovation Fund grant for police services, Canal Fulton and Lawrence Township officials have recently formed committees to draft an economic development agreement, and to collaborate on grants for fire/EMS equipment.

In my last article I was very hopeful that in 2012 the city and township would make significant progress in greater collaboration. Our new mayor and city council have put their best foot forward and the Lawrence Township Board of Trustees has responded.