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Mayor opposes paying for cop at Morristown High

Cresitello says school district should foot bill despite lack of grants

**BY ROB SEMAN
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MORRISTOWN -- Morris School District officials would like to put a police officer on duty in Morristown High School, but the town administration is reluctant to take on the potential cost.

The issue came up at the council meeting on Tuesday, when Councilwoman Raline Smith-Reid asked Mayor Donald Cresitello whether the responsibility of requesting a grant to pay for the officer fell to the town or to the school district.

Cresitello said he would find out, but he flatly stated that he believed the school district should have to pick up the cost of the officer after the grant money has expired. He noted that 70 percent of the district budget is paid by residents of Morris Township.

"This administration does not intend to apply for the grant," Cresitello said.

"If the school board wants that officer there, they can pay for that officer and the cost to the taxpayers of Morristown will be 30 percent," Cresitello said.

Money well is dry

The prospect of putting a police officer in the schools is even more expensive than officials may have realized, since the federal program that supplied the grants has not been funded since 2004.

That program, Community Oriented Policing Services, or COPS in Schools, provided \$125,000 for three years to hire an entry-level police officer. Police departments then can choose to put that officer or a more experienced officer in the school.

The COPS program has awarded more than \$753 million to more than 3,000 law enforcement agencies to fund more than 6,500 school resource officers.

COPS spokesman Gilbert Moore said the program handed out grants last year, but only because some previous school resource officer (SRO) grant funds were returned by municipalities that did not use them. Moore said the municipality, not the school district, must apply for the grants, though that is a moot point now.

"So even if there was clarity about the application process for the town, there is no money to be drawn from," Moore said.

Situation in town

Smith-Reid said she wanted to see whether the town would be better served by having a police officer permanently stationed at the school, as opposed to responding to calls. She also wanted to know how often the police department responds to the school.

Morristown Police Capt. John Kruse said police officers have been called to the school fairly frequently. Kruse said in the past, he and other officers have often gone to the school to walk the hallways and casually interact with the students, but that an SRO would have a more involved role.

School resource officers under the COPS program would teach classes in crime prevention, substance abuse awareness and gang resistance. They also would monitor and assist troubled students through mentoring programs and encourage participation in community service activities, according to the program's Web site.

Mary Donohoe, a spokeswoman for the school district, said that despite the lack of federal funding, the school district still wants to pursue a partnership with the town to share the cost.

Donohoe said Morristown is lagging behind most other towns that she said have SROs. The Morris School District has a resource officer from Morris Township stationed at Frelinghuysen Middle School, which the township helps finance.

School perspective

Donohoe said having a school resource officer at the high school could reduce the need to pull town police officers off street patrols to respond to matters at the school, as well as the frequency of such incidents and the paperwork that goes with them.

"It contributes to the improved safety and the feeling of safety among the students and staff," Donohoe said.

Donohoe said having an officer in the school might make police more privy to information about possible criminal activity in town that police are not yet hearing. Moore said that has held true in some towns with SROs, where as much as 50 percent to 60 percent of the crime occurs around schools and involving school-age children.

"It really does create a relationship between police and the kids where they (the police) are not seen as outsiders," Donohoe said.

"I think for some of the kids, especially in my area, it might be beneficial to have a relationship with a police officer," Smith-Reid said.

Students' views

Some high school students said on Thursday that they wouldn't be opposed to a police officer, but were unsure whether one was necessary.

"I think it's unnecessary because we have our own security guards and they handle situations," said freshman Patrick Figaro, 14. His friends Julio and Edgar Hernandez, both 14, said they agreed.

"I think it would be kind of good because it would make us feel safe," said sophomore Sarah Strelec, 15.

But Sarah and her friends, Andrea Quintero and Stephanie and Michelle Puerta, also said the security guards already handle problems in the school appropriately, and that if the school hired too many police officers, students might feel intimidated.

"But if they had one or two police officers, it wouldn't be bad because people wouldn't get into trouble as much," Michelle said.

Mike Yapple of the New Jersey School Boards Association said he was not aware of state-level grant programs for school resource officers. He said the federal grant helped promote the presence of SROs in schools from 14 towns in 1998 to 135 in 2003.

Yapple said he did not know specifically how the lack of federal money has affected the continuation of SROs, but said he has heard that many police departments have kept them.

Popular program

Robert Tessaro, executive director of the New Jersey Association of School Resource Officers, said he also was not aware of any state grant programs for SROs. But despite the loss of federal funding, he has found that training of new SROs has increased.

Since the association began five years ago, it has trained 567 SROs for New Jersey schools, Tessaro said. He said there are 250 municipalities that have SROs.

"Just about every week we're getting more requests for training," Tessaro said.

Tessaro said it has become common for municipalities and school districts to split the cost of the SROs they hire, or to pay for them through fundraisers or other techniques.

"The recognition and importance of bringing an officer into the school to stop violence before it happens is becoming a priority," Tessaro said.

"I think a lot of the school districts recognize it's going to cost more money to deal with the problem after it has become a problem instead of being proactive."