

Intelligencer Journal

'We could be overwhelmed'

Commissioners hear case for a county health department

BY P.J. REILLY, Intelligencer Journal Staff

Lancaster County is as "prepared as we can be, given the resources we have" to deal with a health pandemic, Randy Gockley, the county's emergency management director, said.



But that doesn't mean the county could handle a crisis, he said.

"We could be overwhelmed," Gockley told the county commissioners Monday afternoon.

According to Gockley, having a health department would better prepare the county for health emergencies.

"Quite frankly, I do not have the staffing expertise (on hand) to address these health-related issues," he said.

He added that, to be fully prepared for a pandemic, "our department would need expertise on staff, or the availability of expertise from a local department of health, to provide the needed assistance and preparedness for health-related emergencies."

Gockley testified before the commissioners during a public hearing the board held to discuss the idea of establishing a county health department here.

About 60 people attended the three-hour session, which featured speakers who were mostly in favor of the idea.

"We urge the board of commissioners to take seriously their responsibility to protect the health of county residents and to pass a resolution to authorize the creation of a local public health department," Dr. Hilda Shirk, project manager of Partnership for a County Public Health Department, said.

The partnership includes United Way of Lancaster County, Business Group on Health, every hospital in the county and National Committee for Amish Religious Freedom.

United Way has led a campaign to form a county health department since 2004.

United Way commissioned Drexel University to conduct a feasibility study, which found a health department could work here.

Shirk was hired by United Way in 2005 to lead the local effort to document the need for and cost of a county health department.

Shirk told the commissioners Monday the county is well equipped when it comes to providing health-care services to individuals.

What it lacks, she said, is a coordinated effort to address public-health issues including food safety, contaminated water sources, toxic lead levels in children and preparedness for epidemics and public-health emergencies.

Currently, such issues fall under the jurisdictions of the state departments of health, agriculture and environmental protection.

But, because those are state agencies, they don't adequately cater to the needs and unique problems of Lancaster County, according to Shirk.

"We would like to see local control, local decision-making by local people who know this area and who live here," Shirk testified.

Counties in Pennsylvania that have health departments authorized to act in the place of the state agencies are Chester, Montgomery, Bucks, Allegheny, Erie and Philadelphia. Additionally, the cities of York, Wilkes-Barre, Allentown and Bethlehem have health departments.

Lancaster city has a board of health, but it does not provide the same level of services as the other cities and counties.

Shirk told the commissioners her partnership envisions starting a countywide department with 18 employees at an annual cost of \$1.5 million.

Federal and state grants, state funds allocated for local health departments, fees charged for services and contributions from local organizations, such as the hospitals, would provide the lion's share of the department's budget.

County taxpayers would chip in about \$110,000 annually.

Mick Owens, owner of Carlos & Charlie's restaurant in Mount Joy and president of the county chapter of the Pennsylvania Restaurant Association, said he and his membership are worried that that figure would rise over time.

"While our association is a steadfast supporter of stringent food-safety standards, our members are nevertheless concerned about the long-term tax implications that might be created by the establishment of a county health department," he said.

Without such a department, however, the county's tourism industry could be at risk should there be incidents of food contamination, said Albert E. Duncan, CEO of Thomas E. Strauss Inc., which owns Miller's Smorgasbord, Plain & Fancy Farm and AmishView Inn & Suites.

"We can't afford for people to think that this county does not have adequate systems in place to protect their safety when they visit us," he said. "Our local economy would suffer terribly if tourists were afraid to eat in our restaurants or sleep in our hotels."

During his election campaign last year, Commissioner Craig Lehman said he supports the idea of establishing a county health department.

Commissioners Dennis Stuckey and Scott Martin both said during their campaigns that creating such a department would unnecessarily increase the size of county government.

Lehman on Monday reiterated his support for the department.

Stuckey and Martin said they are "listening and gathering information."

The commissioners are under no timeline to create a health department or to take the issue off the table.

Shirk said she would like the commissioners to make a decision on the matter by the end of the year.

But Stuckey said the only decision the commissioners must make this year is whether to include money for a health department in the 2009 budget.

"Our department would need expertise on staff, or the availability of expertise from a local department of health, to provide the needed assistance and preparedness for health-related emergencies."

Randy Gockley

County emergency management director