

Local

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City looks to expand its community police

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City officials want to scrap Lancaster's neighborhood police program — and replace it with a bigger one.

Lancaster City Council Tuesday heard a first reading of the neighborhood police ordinance, which city officials believe will enhance law enforcement next year.

Under the ordinance, the city would repeal the neighborhood police program begun in 1998 and replace it with a larger version of the same thing, called

community policing.

Police Chief Sam Gatchell said the main difference will be in numbers. Under neighborhood policing, 24 officers were assigned to certain neighborhoods. Under community policing, the entire patrol division will be taking part.

Mayor Rick Gray supports the change, saying it increases protection for residents.

"Instead of having 24 officers, we will now have 48," Gatchell told council Tuesday.

Council members seemed to favor the change, noting provisions of the 1998 ordinance never were met. Mainly, the neighborhood

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police units never hired the 24 officers the program required.

Mayor Rick Gray supports the change, saying it will increase protection for residents.

"This is an expansion of police services, not a contraction," he said.

Should the ordinance win approval, it would merge the neighborhood police budget with the general police budget. The 1998 ordinance established a separate budget to fund the 24 officers and levied a new tax to pay them.

In addition, Gatchell will be required to make quarterly reports to council on how the program is functioning.

Council likely will vote on the ordinance at its Dec. 19 meeting.

Also Tuesday, council voted unanimously to support an initiative to establish a Lancaster County Board of Health.

The effort is being supported by United Way, Lancaster General Hospital, Ephrata Community Hospital, St. Joseph Health Ministries, various physicians and other organizations.

Hilda A. Shirk of United Way and project manager for Partnership for a County Public Health Department said a county health department

would take over food safety inspections. It also would be on the front lines of an outbreak of infectious diseases, bioterrorism, bird flu, rat or other pest infestations or other major health issues.

Shirk assured council the proposed health department would not replace the city's own health unit, but would work hand-in-hand with it. In fact, she said the city's two health officers are eager to become part of a county effort.

"The opportunity is there for municipalities to join in with the county health department," Shirk said.

Shirk said the county department would be small, with about 20 employees, and be administrative in nature. It will not function as a clinic.

She said she expects the annual budget to be about \$1.8 million, most of which would come from state and federal sources.

"The county's share will be about 14 percent," she said.

Some of that, Shirk added, would come from various foundations.

The county health department must be approved by the county commissioners.

Once approved, she said, the earliest the new department could open its doors would be January 2008.