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## **N.J. FOP attacks regionalization plans as officials from Camden County towns meet**

By James Osborne  
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A state police union leader on Tuesday attacked proposals being made around New Jersey to regionalize police and fire services, as Camden County officials worked to sell local leaders on a countywide force.

Mayors and police and fire chiefs from almost every municipality in the county gathered Tuesday morning for a meeting in which county officials described their proposal as a work in progress, with details to be worked out in the months ahead.

In an interview later in the day, Steve Demofonte, legislative chair of the New Jersey Fraternal Order of Police, said "there's no cooperative effort being proposed."

"My guys are being fired and then given an opportunity to be hired back at considerably less pay," he said. "Unless all your people buy into this plan and are encouraged to make it work, it won't work."

The police unions had remained relatively quiet on the issue of regionalized forces, in which the traditional town police and fire departments are replaced by a larger department in an effort to cut costs. But the concept is starting to gain some momentum, as cash-strapped towns across New Jersey and Pennsylvania consider the once unthinkable.

What form such a force would take in Camden County remains hazy. But dividing lines have already begun to form, with many police and fire chiefs expressing skepticism that a countywide agency can provide service equal to that provided by the town-by-town approach. Mayors, meanwhile, who are watching their budgets shrink by the day, said they were willing to look at anything to cut costs.

"It's really going to boil down to money. Is this going to be good value for me? If it's the same money, and I'm going to have to dismantle my force, I don't know if it's worth it," said Haddon Heights Mayor Scott Alexander.

A concern expressed quietly among suburban officials is whether Camden City will sign on and, if so, whether the suburbs would end up subsidizing the policing of what is ranked the country's second-most-dangerous city.

Neither Camden Mayor Dana L. Redd nor Police Chief Scott Thomson was present at Tuesday's meeting. But after laying off almost half its police force last month, the city would seem an obvious candidate for the regionalized force.

Asked about Camden's involvement in the county talks, mayor's office spokesman Robert Corrales wrote in an e-mail, "We have been concentrating our efforts on budget issues and to seeking solutions to bring back as many public safety personnel as possible."

The one-hour meeting, which was attended by more than 100 officials, ended with plans to form an exploratory committee of mayors and police and fire chiefs to work on forming a proposal for a regionalized force.

Freeholder Director Louis Cappelli Jr. said he was encouraged by the number of officials who turned out,

but remained cautious in estimating how many municipalities would sign on in the near future.

"It could just be two or three towns that come to us," he said. "We won't really know until the towns start to feel the implications of the 2 percent [property tax] cap."

Most towns are in the process of working on their 2011 budgets right now, and are still waiting to find out how much state aid they will receive this year.

Berlin Township, population 6,000, has already laid off 10 percent of its police force, 25 percent of public works employees, and 20 percent of administrative staff members.

"I've been on council 20 years, and we've never had to lay anyone off. But it's happening," said Mayor Phyllis Magazzu.

The emerging scuffle with the police unions follows last year's battle between the teachers union and Gov. Christie over cuts in education spending that resulted in widespread teacher layoffs.

Christie has been increasingly vocal on the subject of police officer pay, recently calling the Camden police contract "obscene." And with layoffs sweeping the state, police union leaders are growing increasingly frustrated.

"The governor wants to slash and burn and start all over," said Demofonte. "That kind of imposition of will by politicians isn't going to work."

The New Jersey Policemen's Benevolent Association, the other sizable police union in the state, also is coming out against regionalization, though with considerably more reserve.

"Our union jobs are part time, but we're trying to get the message out: Make sure you know what you're doing before you dissolve these police forces," said PBA spokesman Jim Ryan. "We have a lot of hesitation."

County officials are set to meet with union leaders next week, in what is likely to be a far harder sell than what they faced with mayors and chiefs Tuesday.

A critical question for the unions will be on pay and benefit cuts for officers who take jobs with the countywide force. Cappelli has said salaries for starting officers would come down, but he has held off on stating publicly what would happen to veteran officers.

Asked Tuesday about opposition from police, Cappelli said he wasn't surprised.

"It's their livelihood," he said.

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