

# Banks council hears proposal by Washington Co. Sheriff's office

Banks City Council listened with focused attention, at a January 27 workshop, and asked many questions during a presentation by the Washington County Sheriff's Office (WCSO) outlining a potential model for providing police services for the city. Later in the evening, Mayor Mike Lyda discussed with council the costs of supporting the police department from the general fund through 2006.

## Gaston model described

Based on the model of community policing developed over the last year with the City of Gaston, Sheriff Rob Gordon explained that having an officer permanently stationed in Gaston has created "an outpost" of the department in that part of the county, a great advantage to the sheriff's office. "The smartest way to police small communities is to form partnerships with strong communication," according to Gordon, both within the community and to the county. The greatest advantage may be that an officer would always be available for the position, even if the regular officer is on leave or in training.

Chief Deputy Pat Garrett, who has attended several council meetings, presented the "nuts and bolts" of the options developed for Banks by the sheriff's department: The county would provide an experienced officer working inside the city limits three-quarters time, with the additional quarter time spent in the local area outside the city. In addition, the county would assume most of the administrative duties and furnish a car. The cost to the city would include a median

sheriff's salary, \$93,257 for .75 full time employee (FTE) and 66 cents per mile for a vehicle.

The council was already painfully aware of the administrative burden imposed on the city when trying to support their own department. Banks has had a large turnover of officers and has been without a chief since May 2003. Sheriff Gordon presented a graphic showing the required administrative duties, which include filing reports, developing policies, handling human resource issues, arranging required training opportunities, etc. In a small agency, administration can consume about 60 percent of a department's available time. With an additional amount, about 10 percent, used by required leaves, a small agency has only 30 percent, or so, of hours available for field work.

In contrast, Gordon said, "The county's goal is to provide thirty hours [per week] of police time in the field," which they can do because, as a large department, economy of scale provides a wide range of administrative services. WCSO is a nationally accredited police training agency, has a complete policy manual and can provide a variety of professional management services including specialists in records management, peer support, grant writing, crime prevention, purchasing, and statistics. In addition, the county provides a broad range of field support services including specialty response

teams, task forces and community resources. Gordon said that field services are available to the city now, but access would be greatly enhanced with an officer on site.

Gordon explained that Banks could choose to supply and maintain their own vehicle (as long as it met county standards), but there are many advantages in using a county vehicle. A county officer in Banks would have a fully equipped and maintained vehicle, including a federally mandated mobile terminal upgrade required by September of this year. The city could make decisions about the appearance of a county car, and would pay for mileage only within the city. Estimating that an officer would average 25-30 miles per day, or less, the cost to the city would be about \$30 per day. In the past, the city has budgeted \$40,000 per year for materials and services, with most of that amount going to vehicle maintenance.

## Vehicle, equipment considerations

Banks Police Officer Rob Richards, currently in training, said that council will "be looking at cars" if they decided to furnish a vehicle or maintain a police department. The city's two active vehicles each have over 100,000 miles and require constant maintenance. Last year, council budgeted funds to lease a vehicle, a cheaper option over the long run, then de-

cided not to do so, fearing that a new vehicle would present a poor public image when attempting to pass a department levy. Richards noted that other department equipment is outdated to the point that finding repairs is becoming difficult.

Deputy Jason Hermann, who is serving in Gaston, told council that he enjoys the rewards of being a part of the community, as opposed to operating out of the district office. Because of his relationship with other officers in the county, Hermann said, the city is "really getting 24/7 coverage" since he communicates with them at the beginning and end of each shift. Additionally, his hours are flexible, allowing him to attend community and school events.

Councilor Teri Branstitt asked if a single .75 officer, as Hermann works under the Gaston contract, could provide adequate coverage for Banks which has twice the population. Garrett said that the city could contract for whatever level of coverage they desired. A Banks Police Department budget was about \$180,000 per year under the previous levy, which for the last couple of years forced the department to postpone vehicle maintenance and other equipment upgrades. The same amount could, potentially, pur-

chase a 1.5 FTE contract with Washington County.

## City funding considered

Mayor Lyda outlined a proposal that would hire a chief to redevelop the city's department for the remainder of this fiscal year, creating a carryover to the 2005-2006 budget of \$68,250. Supplemented by a transfer of \$111,750 from the general fund, this would allow the city to have a two-person department with a budget of \$180,000, through 2006.

He then initiated discussion of the two proposals, saying that the Washington County plan was "the full meal deal" as opposed to the lean city-operated department possible on a \$180,000 budget that "didn't work before." Councilor Kirk Andrews suggested that the city should start small [with a .75 contract] and see how this level of service met the city's needs.

City Attorney Jim Lucas noted that "nobody in Washington County" has ever passed a double majority levy (which a November 2005 election would be). Regardless of whether the city maintains its own department or contracts with Washington County, a public safety levy will be required for a future program.

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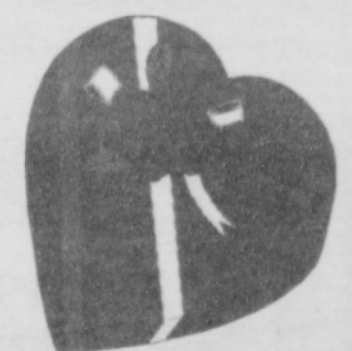
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