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## Budget, police staffing collide

Howell searches for a solution

By **Michelle Gladden** • FREEHOLD BUREAU • May 5, 2008

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**HOWELL** — With the state limiting municipalities to no more than a 4 percent tax levy increase, towns such as Howell face the daunting task of balancing their books without cutting essential services.

For this 62-square-mile community with over 50,000 residents patrolled by a 97-member police force, those constraints mean having to think of creative ways to address the department's staffing shortage, its reserve of



Howell police headquarters is on Old Tavern Road. (STAFF PHOTO: MICHELLE GLADDEN)

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unused compensatory time and hefty overtime budget.

"The single most important thing we have to provide for residents is public safety," said Mayor Joseph DiBella. "The difficulty we have is to make additional investments in the Police Department when we are up against so many other challenges."

This year, the Police Department received approval during the 2008 budget workshop process to hire two additional officers although there was a request for five new officers.

"One of those new hires is to replace an officer that retired last month," said PBA president Guy Arancio. "We are in reality only getting one new officer."

The department received an additional \$50,000 toward its overtime budget (\$480,000 in 2007), bringing its total 2008 operating costs to \$11,339,530, an increase of 8.01 percent over last year. It was one of only two departments to see an increase in appropriation.

"There is an urgent need to increase this township's number of police officers and decrease expenditures specifically attributed to overtime," said Chief Ronald T. Carter in an October 2007 report to township officials. "Due to required programs involving public schools and related community services, manpower in the patrol and investigative divisions could not be adequately increased to keep up with the increase in residents and calls for service. To date, the Police Department is critically understaffed."

An independent study found that the Police Department needs 20 more officers, Carter said. That shortage has contributed to an estimated 6,000 hours in accrued compensatory time and the 2007 overtime budget of \$536,955, up nearly 140 percent over what was allocated in 2006.

According to the 2000 census, Howell's population grew by 25.4 percent from 1990 to 2000. While the state average for the number of full-time municipal police officers was calculated at 2.5 per 1,000 population, Howell comes in shy at 1.9. The Monmouth County average is 2.4, meaning Howell would need an additional 26 officers to match the county average or 31 additional officers to match the state average.

"We work under a minimum manpower requirement," Arancio said. "This town is very large, and you have to have a certain amount of officers here to cover the town. When you throw in the mix some training, vacation, sick time — it's very rare that an officer can come in and say, '(there are) enough officers here, I want to leave on comp time and put in for 10 hours.' "

Arancio said each officer donates four hours per month in overtime back to the community.

"Based on an average figure, the town has and will continue to receive over \$20,000 of give-back time from the Police Department," Arancio said.

Although union officials say a retirement incentive plan that involves paid benefits for retiring officers would help to save the township over \$2 million, township officials worry about long-term effect.



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But union officials say a compensation analysis prepared by a labor consultant showed that paid retirement benefits would give officers who have reached top pay and who have served the community for well over 20 years an incentive to retire, allowing for the hiring of new officers for lower pay.

"Three-quarters of the department is at top pay," Arancio said. "In the next three years, all but 10 to 12 of the present staff will be at top pay."

Currently, the township's retired officers receive 80 percent of the lowest plan offered through the state health Chapter 330 benefits program. Chapter 330 is a provision for police departments that don't offer paid health benefits to officers after retirement, Arancio said. Unlike neighboring communities such as Aberdeen, Colts Neck, Middletown, Wall, Lakewood and Freehold, Howell retired officers must pay at least 20 percent of health benefits, more if they want to buy into a better plan, Arancio said.

The Howell Police Department was formed in 1972. Although police officers typically retire after 25 to 27 years of service to a community, many of Howell's officers are entering 30 years of service, union officials said.

"We discovered that what keeps people here long is the fact that they don't have the medical benefits on retirement," said Superior Officers Association president David Flaherty. "An increase in those benefits would save the township money by encouraging retirements, especially in the first four or five years."

But township officials say that such a plan offers no guarantees that officers would indeed retire or of what the financial impact would be to the township after 10 years or longer.

"There has been discussion between the township and the police unions on a number of items," DiBella said. "In the end, both sides want to do what is best for the town. The township has to be mindful of the short- and long-term effects of anything we talk about. There has to be a careful examination of all the issues."

**Michelle Gladden: (732) 308-7753 or [mgladden@app.com](mailto:mgladden@app.com)**

## In your voice

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**sir99** wrote:

How about letting officers answer calls and not requiring them to be "productive" and sit on the side of the road hoping to say "gotcha"?

5/6/2008 7:43:54 AM

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**gec1975** wrote:

lets not cut our unneccessary spending ie; new side walks, new park sets, work on city halls etc. lets cut our first responders. That makes alot of sense. All of the towns in Monmouth County are doing the same thing, we will put up a new beach club and

new bathrooms for the parks, but will not hire more cops and want to cut salaries. Our priorities are backwards.

5/5/2008 10:49:31 PM

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**GARANCIO** wrote:

**CORRECTION\*\* MISPRINT\*\*** Reference the 4hr giveback- The Police give back over \$200,000.00 per year not \$20,000.00

5/5/2008 4:34:02 PM

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**rrgardener** wrote:

Sure we may be safe in our town, but have you ever called our police for help - their response time isn't the greatest. If we had more officers to patrol all the streets & parks we have maybe they could do their jobs more effectively. It is sad that we only have 97 officers & are the largest town in Monmouth county. Howell PD, you can only do your job if you have the proper resorces to do so. What is wrong with our State.

5/5/2008 2:14:46 PM

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**STRESSEDOUT** wrote:

one thing i dont mind my taxes going up for is our police force. security is number 1.. they prove it by handing back 4 hrs ot every month. i like to go to sleep everynight and know my family is safe. if they need volunteers to help out contact me.

5/5/2008 6:28:01 AM

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