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No Tax Increase with New Police Building in Lower Township

The residents of Lower Township would be better served if their police department was moved from the aging building at the county airport and returned to the municipal complex and a new building that would be constructed next to Township Hall on Bayshore Road, according to township officials.

Both Police Chief William Mastriana and former Chief Brian Marker have asked council to consider the move to a new building in the municipal complex citing their experience in running a department in the current building that has a number of logistical and construction issues.

“The move makes economic and administrative sense and would be an added boost to public safety,” according to Township Manager Mike Voll. “Plus, there won’t be a tax increase to pay for the project.” The police were located at the current municipal complex when the county sold them a building at the county airport that is now over 70-years-old and had originally been built to construct tractors. Its conversion to a police station was fraught with problems and has ended costing the township a huge sum, over \$4 million.

At a recent township meeting, former Mayor Jack Sparks said that the only mistake he made when he was in office was “we did not build the original police station next to township hall big enough. We did not see the population increase coming,” he said.

Sparks firmly believes the police department’s return to Bayshore Road would benefit the township.

“The building at the airport is far removed with no public transportation and needs a number of costly improvements and is a constant drain on expenses with rising energy costs,” said Voll.

In addition to issues like air quality, mold, sewage back up, lack of windows and a leaking roof, there is a \$95,000 yearly utility bill, and an \$85,000 annual savings in other areas.

At over 55,000 square feet, it is entirely too big and expensive to heat and cool, Voll said. For example, Mastriana has to walk 260 feet from his office to greet a member of the public and many of the offices can’t be utilized for anything more than storage.

The building’s flat roof, which currently holds 17 HVAC units, has to be replaced. That cost would be an estimated \$1.8 million.

Voll said that it would be more cost effective and cause no tax increase to the residents to construct a new building that would connect to Township Hall. The estimated cost of a new building is \$3.5 million to \$3.8 million. It will not generate a tax increase and it is the perfect time to move with interest rate so low.

According to Lauren Read, the township’s chief financial officer, Lower Township has the capacity to

borrow up to \$29 million between 2015 and 2018 for capital projects without raising taxes.

“Currently, the township has \$7.2 million in debt authorized. That leaves \$21.8 million available to fund whatever capital projects council feels would benefit the township, noted Read.

The new building would be 12,600 square feet, with a 1,700 square foot garage, on the south side of Township Hall.

“A new building would allow better interaction between the police department and the township manager,” said Voll. “Additionally people wouldn’t feel isolated from the source of public safety.”

Mastriana said most calls to the department come from the Villas and North Cape May.

“As you know, the township has taken the stand to identify and combat the issues of drug and drug addiction. It has been identified, based on calls for service and incidents related to overdoses that the area of most concern falls within the Villas and North Cape May,” said Mastriana. “The new facility places the agency closer to those areas of concern, therefore giving us the advantage combating the drug issue.”

“The move will bring the police back to Bayshore Road where they are needed most,” added Voll. “Their presence will be seen as police travel one of the township’s busiest roads and be steps away from the school, the senior center, the recreation department and the library.”

Voll said the constant police presence would bring a comfort level to people who use those facilities.

The Pros:

-Economic Savings – According to township officials, it would be less costly to build a new facility than spend additional funds trying to repair and/or replace current issues with the roof, mold, sewage, lighting, air quality and energy. Plus, the cost of the new building wouldn’t cause a tax increase.

-Administrative Access – In most municipalities, the police department is located within or near the municipal building in order to provide the officials, such as the township manager, police chief and others involved in public safety to have better communication.

-Public Safety – The benefit of having a constant police presence in an area of the township that has both an issue with crime and drug use and protecting assets such as the school, recreation department, senior center and library.

