

Jenkintown Police and Borough Solvency: **A Better Approach**

I. Introduction

We, the members of Jenkintown Matters, present this document in response to the efforts of Jenkintown's administration to dissolve the Jenkintown Police Department (JPD) and outsource policing services to a neighboring municipality, particularly Abington Township.¹ As part of these efforts, the administration recently voted to ask a state agency biased towards regionalization to perform a cost-benefit analysis on all of Jenkintown's public safety services.²

Our research has documented that the administration began discussions about the department's dissolution during the spring of 2023. In July 2023, the Jenkintown Borough Council met with Bellevue Communications, a public relations firm. On July 26th, without public deliberation or explanation of this agreement, Council voted unanimously and without public disclosure to contract with Bellevue to help the administration plan its response to the expected public reaction to the news of its plans to dissolve the JPD.

Information obtained from a Right to Know request shows that two days after the Bellevue contract was approved, George Locke, Borough Manager, discussed the possibility of outsourcing Jenkintown's police service with Abington's Town Manager, Richard Manfredi.³

The timing of this meeting coming nearly two months before the start of its negotiations with the Jenkintown Police Benevolent Association (JPBA) appears designed to give the Borough administration sufficient time to work out a preliminary agreement with Abington Township and to give it leverage over the JPBA. As we have documented, Abington's leadership have shown no interest in the proposal.⁴

When local media reported the existence of the Bellevue contract in early February of 2024, the administration was forced to hold two public meetings to defend its actions. It additionally held a restricted and questionably legal third meeting with residents of the Beaver Hill condominiums. Members of the administration also met privately with some concerned citizens.

During these meetings, the administration attempted to make its case that:

1. The JPD is financially unsustainable, and
2. JPD officers are ineffective and ethically compromised.

This response intends to dispute both of these allegations.

II. Fiscal Sustainability

Police Budget

According to the administration, the police budget is “roughly \$2.5 million, which includes insurance and other costs.” This would constitute less than half of Jenkintown’s general fund budget, which the administration claims is an unreasonably high percentage.^{5,6} However, **Jenkintown’s non-benefit-related police spending “ranks roughly around the median and is mostly consistent with the other boroughs,”** according to a 2023 economic report by Jeremy Crimmel, PhD.⁷ It is unclear whether benefit-related police spending is higher than in other boroughs. If this is indeed the case, it is an issue which should be dealt with directly by addressing benefit costs. It should also be noted that, because the figure of \$2.5 million supposedly includes “unfunded liabilities” not listed in the budget, it is impossible to independently verify. It has also been claimed that the police pension is included within the figure, but the Police Pension Fund’s revenues do not appear to come from taxation.^{6,8}

Sewer System Repairs

Another sustainability-related argument used by the administration is the cost of Cheltenham’s future sewer repairs, for which Jenkintown will be partially liable. Specifically, the administration anticipates “\$2.4 to \$11.9 million” in sewer-related costs.⁵ This is on top of the approximately \$1.1 million in sewer-related debt which, according to the latest DCED report, is on the Borough’s books.⁹ For comparison, the president of the Borough Council claimed in a public meeting that the Borough might save up to \$500,000 dollars a year by outsourcing the police department. Based on this information, **it appears the sewer represents a much more dire sustainability issue for Jenkintown than does the JPD.**

Other municipalities in similar situations have made the decision to sell their sewer systems, earning large sums of money in the process. In some cases, they received significantly more than their asking price. For example, in 2015 the residents of Springfield Township were expecting an increase in their sewer rates from slightly over \$4 to around \$9, prompting them to sell their sewer system. They initially asked for \$9 million but, according to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, ended up collecting \$16.5 million as a result of bidding. The residents’ sewer rates did eventually increase by around the same amount that they were expecting prior to the sale, but they were able to pay for parks and a new municipal campus as a result of this process.¹⁰

It is important to note, however, that other municipalities have had less favorable experiences, seeing considerable increases in their rates. Although this is certainly not a decision which Jenkintown should make hastily, disbanding the JPD without exploring this option would be premature. Otherwise, **Jenkintown may find itself forced to sell its sewer system even after outsourcing its police department.**

Public Works Employees

A third sustainability-related argument put forth by the administration is that more money is needed to pay Public Works employees.⁵ Although it may be true that the Public Works employees are paid less than those in surrounding municipalities, aside from issues of fairness, we believe it unnecessary to sacrifice eleven JPD employees to fix this issue.

Reserve Fund

A fourth sustainability-related argument made by the administration is that the Borough does not allocate enough money to its Reserve Fund. Specifically, the administration claims that it currently allocates 5% of its revenue for this purpose which, according to them, “is bare minimum.”

Instead, the administration sets the Borough’s target allocation at 10%.⁵ While this may be a commendable goal, reaching it via the JPD’s dissolution seems extreme. **We urge the administration to seek solutions that raise revenue and increase economic activity in the business district before embarking on draconian measures that target an essential community resource.**

Capital Projects Fund

The final sustainability-related argument commonly referenced by the administration is that the Borough lacks the resources to adequately fund capital projects. This does not hold up under scrutiny; **projected revenues for the Capital Projects Fund increased by over 305% between 2023 and 2024.** Most of this money is derived from grants.⁶

It appears, however, that in both 2022 and 2023 the fund’s actual revenues were significantly under-budget. In fact, the Borough had to transfer \$120,000 from the General Fund to the Capital Projects Fund in 2023, six times more than what was budgeted for that year.⁶ Rather than seeking to transfer yet more money intended for the General Fund by dissolving the JPD, the administration should focus on promoting long-term economic development along with securing grants.

While grants will provide a quick-fix to the problem, they often come with strings that erode Jenkintown’s independence. The Town Square, for instance, seems like an asset to the community, but it can never be developed into something that generates revenue for the Borough and School District. A strategic approach to guiding development is the time-tested method of making communities sustainable. One only needs to walk through downtown Hatboro to see the resulting benefits.

III. Personnel

In addition to the aforementioned sustainability-related arguments, the administration also advanced *without evidence* personnel-related arguments in defense of their position.

Crime Rate Comparisons

The first of these arguments call into question the JPD's effectiveness. On numerous occasions, the administration suggests that the JPD is incapable of adhering to "21st Century Policing" standards and is, therefore, unable to meet the public's expectations.⁵ Although every organization has room for improvement, **the idea that the JPD is an ineffective department is simply not borne out by the data.** To begin with, Jenkintown records a lower crime rate than either Abington or Cheltenham. The administration claims that this is an apples-to-oranges comparison because Abington and Cheltenham have large malls.

Jenkintown has its own crime-promoting factors, however. For example, in neither Cheltenham nor Abington can one find as high of a concentration of bars and taverns. Additionally, Jenkintown's many wealthy homes and businesses make attractive targets for theft. Jenkintown is also home to SEPTA's Jenkintown-Wyncote train station which, according to Wikipedia, is the ninth-busiest station in the regional rail system (out of 146 stations), and the fourth-busiest outside Philadelphia.

Finally, Jenkintown's entire business district is located along the Route 611 corridor, a four-lane highway which, according to PennDOT, funnels up to 24,000 vehicles between Philadelphia and the PA Turnpike daily.

As well as managing Jenkintown's crime rate, the JPD appears to be remarkably successful with regards to community policing. Many in the community feel a strong bond with these police officers, and an online search does not reveal any published complaints against the JPD from community members. The administration has thus far failed to provide any evidence in support of their claims that the JPD is ineffective.

Smeal Report

The administration has, on many occasions, cited the audit authored by W. Ronald Smeal, Police Management Consultant (the Smeal Report) to suggest that the JPD is ineffective. Mr. Smeal was retained by the administration to provide an overview of the JPD's structure and performance, as well as recommendations aimed at improving the department.

In his forward, Smeal notes that "Management studies, by their very nature, often appear somewhat negative and highly critical", and that "shortcomings must be addressed more fully than the positive aspects of police operations".¹¹ In other words, consultants that don't find problems aren't doing their job, but the administration ignored these disclaimers and implies that the report and its 90 recommendations justifies the dissolution of the JPD.

We further take note of Smeal's stated biases. In an article published in the *York Daily Record*, he has stated that his purpose in life is to regionalize law enforcement. At a meeting with the Southern (PA) Regional Police commissioners in 2017, he declared "I eat, sleep and live regionalization."¹²

Careful examination of the list of recommendations contained within the report demonstrates that many of them are easy fixes. One recommendation is to "Purchase relevant publications" for JPD officers and supervisors. Another advises that the "Mayor should continue to work jointly with the Chief of Police" to plan for future challenges affecting the JPD. Three items in the list pertain to a K-9 unit which no longer exists.¹¹

Nowhere in the report does Smeal recommend that the JPD be dissolved and outsourced, nor did he make this claim when he was given the opportunity to address Jenkintown residents at one of the administration's public meetings.

Professional Ethics

Another personnel-related argument promulgated by the administration is that JPD officers are unethical. One example often cited by the administration is the accumulation of "Kelly hours".⁵ Kelly hours describe a form of bankable overtime but compensated at the same rate as regular time, rather than time-and-a-half.

The Borough's argument ignores the fact that the administration has never insisted on a police contract which stipulates that Kelly hours must be paid out yearly, despite an opportunity to do so at every single contract negotiation. It also ignores the fact that the administration set a precedent of paying out accrued hours, doing so for past officers who either resigned from the JPD or were furloughed. The administration missed an opportunity to address this issue in 2017, when three JPD officers approached certain officials to discuss department-related issues, including the build-up of Kelly hours. The officers' warnings were ignored.

A second example referenced by the administration is that JPD officers are paid for a full 12-hour day, even when attending training sessions lasting for 8 or 9 hours.⁵ This training pay is contractual. If, instead, JPD officers were only reimbursed for 8-9 hours every time they go on training, it means that they would lose 3-4 hours of pay in each of those instances. If the Borough wishes to encourage JPD officers to receive as much training as possible, this policy seems counter-productive.

The administration has also called the JPD's ethics into question by insisting that officers within the JPBA have refused to negotiate fairly during the ongoing round of contract negotiations. Specifically, the administration claimed that it "Provided a very fair offer to the PBA with a base pay increase" but, despite this, "The PBA stopped negotiations and walked away from the table".⁵

What the administration fails to mention is that the “base pay increase” in question did not even constitute a cost-of-living adjustment. When benefit-related changes are also considered, the administration’s proposed contract represents an enormous decrease in the actual yearly wage of a JPD officer. When it became clear that the administration had no intention of budging from its position, the JPBA filed for arbitration.

IV. Conclusion

Although the administration has tried to present numerous arguments in defense of its attempts to dissolve the JPD, in our assessment, none of them justify drastic measures that erode the independence of our community.

The JPD is a 130-year-old institution that has earned the trust of Jenkintown residents. While we have no reason to doubt about the policing abilities of the Abington force, we not only find it difficult to envision officers from an outside organization displaying the same level of dedication to Jenkintown as does the JPD, we have proven it unnecessary and impractical.

Further, it seems unlikely that Jenkintown will be able to maintain an appropriate level of control over the police department of a much larger municipality. Even if Jenkintown experiences an initial reduction in cost, this can evaporate if Abington’s policing costs increase. This could happen if Abington hires more officers or if the Abington PBA negotiates a pay increase for its members.

Finally, we know that Abington Township will not assume the policing duties for our town. We expect Council to explain why it doesn’t remove this option from the table. What was the real purpose of its bid to disband our police force?

Jenkintown Matters, along with the people of Jenkintown, will continue to stand together in opposition to the administration’s plan to dissolve and outsource the JPD or any proposal that jeopardizes the wellbeing of our community.

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