

## MIDDLETOWN

## Arbitrators will decide on police contract

*One supervisor didn't recall police contract talks ever going to binding arbitration.*

By CHRIS ENGLISH COURIER TIMES

A new contract for Middletown police will be decided through binding arbitration and not hammered out in face-to-face talks.

The current three-year contract expires at the end of the year, and police union representatives requested binding arbitration at the end of the latest negotiating session aimed at reaching a new deal, said township Manager Richard Gestrich.

While declining to talk about the sticking points, Gestrich said he was somewhat surprised by the arbitration request.

"I think they felt we were moving slowly, but I just thought it was a little abrupt," he said.

The Courier Times was unsuccessful in reaching Middletown police union President Detective Brian McDonough, for comment. Another police negotiator, Officer Steve Forman, and the attorney representing police, Anthony Busillo, also could not be reached for comment.

Township Supervisor Robert McMonagle, a longtime township resident and supervisor since 2002, said he doesn't recall police contract negotiations ever going to binding arbitration.

"I think it's unfortunate," he said. "I know we could have negotiated a fair contract for both the police and taxpayers, but they chose this route, so we'll just have to see how it plays out."

Board Chairwoman Lisa Pflaumer said the decision for arbitration does not preclude the two sides from talking. She also declined to talk about specifics of the negotiations.

"I really hope we can engage in dialogue and come to some agreement on some of these outstanding issues," said Pflaumer.

According to Gestrich, the binding arbitration process works like this: The contract will be decided by a panel of three arbitrators. Each side picks its own arbitrator. For the township, that will be the attorney representing it in negotiations, Andy Rolfes of Philadelphia. The police arbitrator will be its attorney Busillo, Gestrich said.

The two sides then pick the third arbitrator, the neutral one, from a list of three submitted by the American Arbitration Association, said Gestrich. Each side eliminates one name from the list and the neutral arbitrator will be the one that is left, he said.

The arbitration session is scheduled for either Dec. 19 or 21, Gestrich added.

The current contract gave cops raises of 3 percent in 2005, 3.25 percent in 2006 and 3.5 percent this year. The contract covers 51 department members, including patrol officers, detectives and sergeants. It does not cover two lieutenants, Patrick McGinty and James Kane, and Chief Frank McKenna.

This year, starting Middletown patrol officers earn annual salaries of \$41,477. Officers with three years' experience earn \$64,647, while detectives get \$67,062 and sergeants \$69,049.

This year's township budget sets aside about \$6.9 million for police salaries and benefits, including those of McGinty, Kane and McKenna, said finance director Betsy Reukauf.

As a preparatory tool for talks with police, the township is paying a fee not to exceed \$9,850 to Public Financial Management Inc. for a report that includes information on salaries, benefits and other information from about six to 10 nearby departments. The supervisors approved the contract in June before talks with police began and, at the time, McDonough called it premature.