

Policing costs continue to be debated

OPP commissioner, Penetanguishene mayor offer alternative viewpoints

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By Travis Mealing

PENETANGUISHENE – Heated discussions about the rising cost of municipal policing prompted OPP Commissioner Chris Lewis to release a video this week addressing “misinformation” surrounding the issue.

Penetanguishene Mayor Gerry Marshall, however, said Lewis seems to have missed the point.

In the video, Lewis acknowledged the matter is “complex” and “emotional.” He also agreed that municipalities are facing critical budgeting challenges.

“Policing is a huge piece of most municipal budgets,” he said. “Municipalities are understandably looking for efficiencies.”

Lewis stressed he does not seek out municipalities in order to sell elected officials on the benefits of the OPP. He noted it is cash-strapped municipalities that make the first move.

“We are not seeking to ... take over municipal policing responsibilities from any agency,” he said. “But, when we are asked, the OPP is almost always the least expensive policing option.”

Marshall, recently re-elected to the executive committee of the Mayors’ Coalition for Affordable, Sustainable and Accountable Policing, congratulated Lewis for making the video.

However, he added, the commissioner seems to believe municipalities have some degree of control over policing costs.

“The final decisions are made by the service and the Ministry (of Community Safety and Correctional Services), not local police service boards or municipal councils, Marshall said. “The province controls every aspect of the service, (but) municipalities must pay for the brunt of it with no say.”

The mayors’ coalition has asked the province to help municipalities control costs and increase accountability, or remove policing from the municipal budget altogether, as is the case with education.

“If the municipality has no authority to set how its money is being spent, then it just stands to reason the service doesn’t belong in the municipal budget,” said Marshall, whose town chose to remain with the OPP in 2011 after a nine-month review of its options.

The mayor said many municipalities will face another 10 per cent increase in policing costs effective Jan. 1, 2014, as the OPP rate approaches “big city” standards.

“Cities like Toronto are not policed by the OPP,” he said. “Small-town Ontario is, and we cannot afford big-city rates.”