

# Policing costs: mayors beef up fight

By Daniel R. Pearce, Simcoe Reformer - Monday, May 21, 2012 7:19:20 EDT PM

Ontario's rural mayors have intensified their fight to get spiraling OPP costs under control and plan to hire a public relations firm to help shape their message to Queen's Park. They're asking town halls across the province to donate \$1,000 each to cover the costs of their campaign, which will also include setting up a website and meeting directly with the minister of community safety and correctional services.

"We want to fix the problem and do it this year," said Tillsonburg Mayor John Lessif, who sits on the steering committee of the Mayors Coalition for Affordable Sustainable Accountable Policing or ASAP for short.

Ontario's rural municipalities say the cost of contracting the OPP to act as their police force takes up an inordinate chunk of their operating budgets, in some cases as much as one-half. The problem, they say, is a system that gives them no say over staffing levels at detachments or pay increases given to officers.

The group wants town halls to either be given more input into OPP policies that affect costs or have the province take over policing budgets completely. Lessif said the problem is that rural mayors met with the minister in 2011 and were told then their concerns would be addressed by the following year — and then weren't.

This winter, the ministry announced it had formed a task force that includes members of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario to discuss the issue.

That group, however, will not be allowed to address issues the mayors feel are key, such as legislated "adequacy standards" that impact staffing levels and collective bargaining practices with police, Lessif said.

"We are not confident the task force is empowered enough to make the changes that are necessary to be made this year," he said in an interview.

Looming on the horizon is an 8.5% pay increase Queen's Park is giving OPP officers in 2014. Given that wages and benefits make up about 80% of policing costs, it will have a significant impact on municipal budgets. The coalition decided earlier this year they would try to talk directly to the minister, Madeleine Meilleur, themselves.

"In today's world, you need collaboration and partners. A one-off discussion has not resulted in any progress," said Lessif, whose municipality spends about 29% of its budget on policing and is "falling behind" on paying off debts because of it.

In March, a spokesperson for Meilleur said the minister "is always willing to meet with municipal officials to discuss all issues in her portfolio that are impacting municipalities."

The ASAP coalition steering committee includes Norfolk Mayor Dennis Travale.