Who'll collect Forks' taxes?

Departure forces township to discuss outside company.

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By EDWARD SIEGER
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FORKS TWP. -- Supervisors are trying to decide how best to collect the township's earned income tax following the sudden departure of one of its tax collectors.

The board has also agreed to increase the annual salary of the township's elected real estate tax collector.

Mary Ann Kessler, the township's earned income tax collector, resigned last week. Kessler's resignation letter indicated she left her post for personal reasons, supervisors said Thursday.

In her absence, deputy tax collectors Sharon Fisher and Cathy Kichline -- who also serves as township manager -- have collected the earned income tax. EIT collection is busy this time of year as the self-employed and companies begin filing quarterly EIT returns, Kichline said.

The board debated Thursday whether to accept a proposal from Bangor-based Berkheimer Associates to collect the tax or hire someone else to handle EIT collection in-house. Berkheimer submitted a three-year proposal under which the company would keep 2.25 percent of all EIT collected.

According to the 2005 budget, the township anticipates receiving more than $1.35 million from the EIT.

Supervisors' Chairman John Ackerman said he'd rather not see an outside firm collecting the township's taxes. Collecting the taxes in-house affords the township better control over the operation, he said.

But the township is not in a position to search for, hire and train a new tax collector, Supervisor David Hoff said. If supervisors decide to hire a new tax collector for 2006, the township can end a Berkheimer contract with 90 days written notice, he added.

After Hoff made a motion to hire Berkheimer, the meeting broke down into a veritable free-for-all as residents randomly offered suggestions and accusations.

Residents suggested supervisors find out why Kessler resigned and ask her to return, intimating that a larger problem exists among township staff. Others suggested the township hire temporary office workers to handle the extra workload.

Eventually, Supervisors Henning Holmgaard and Hoff voted to hire Berkheimer while Bonnie Nicholas and Ackerman voted against the decision. Supervisor Donald Miller defeated the proposal with his "no" vote, asking that the matter be postponed until the board's Feb. 17 meeting so Solicitor Karl Kline could review the contract.

As for the real estate tax collector, June Vail had asked supervisors in January to increase her annual salary. Following a 2003 lawsuit against the township, a compromise was reached that

paid Vail $5,000 for the first 2,500 township property tax bills processed and 75 cents for each bill thereafter.

Vail and the Easton Area School District have a similar agreement, and she collects a fee for preparing township tax certificates. Vail said she earned $7,000 last year from the township, which pales in comparison to other township tax collectors.

Ackerman suggested the township pay Vail $2 for each tax bill after the first 2,500 bills. Vail said she was seeking a $15,000 flat fee.

Supervisors agreed it would be easier to budget a set salary each year, agreeing on the $15,000 fee. The new salary goes into effect in 2006.

In another personnel matter, supervisors agreed Thursday to create a facilities manager position to oversee the maintenance of all township buildings. The township has expanded its community center, police station and parks maintenance building, and construction is under way on a new municipal building and fire station.

The position also includes maintaining the township's geographic information system.

After a one-hour closed-door session, supervisors appointed current public works director Pete Gheller to the new position. The board also agreed to advertise for Gheller's replacement.

Ackerman said the board also discussed other personnel issues he could not discuss in public.

Reporter Edward Sieger can be reached at 610-258-7171 or by e-mail at esieger@express-times.com.

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