

Official silence on Mount Joy chief Mount Joy officials have placed their police chief on paid administrative leave, and borough taxpayers can only scratch their heads and wonder why.

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Officials aren't saying anything publicly, claiming the action against Police Chief John O'Connell is a "personnel issue."

Technically, that's true. Police chiefs draw paychecks, just like any other public employee. They have a boss or bosses to answer to, just like average Joe employees. Their personnel records are pretty much sealed from public view.

But in most communities, police chiefs assume a much higher profile. They are recognizable public officials in a way similar to the elected mayors and council members who appoint them to their posts.

However, like the bell-ringer Quasimodo declaring, "Sanctuary! Sanctuary!" public officials often invoke the "personnel" excuse -- only their motives are quite different than the bell-ringer's.

Although there is a legal basis for what they say, the public nonetheless is kept in the dark on subjects about which they should know more, not less.

All that's publicly known about the Mount Joy case is that the chief is on paid leave -- a "forced" vacation -- and his status will be addressed at some point in the future.

Borough officials did toss a bone or two the public's way.

They say the personnel action had nothing to do with a controversial incident in which a Mount Joy man died after being Tasered by police in 2010.

Also, Mayor Mary Ginder says there are no allegations of illegal or unethical conduct on the part of O'Connell, who has been chief since 2007.

So, what's left?

Questions about O'Connell's competence? If that's the case, don't Mount Joy citizens have a right to know that their safety is in the hands of a police chief whom borough officials think unfit or unsuited for the job?

A falling out with the mayor or council over police or borough policy? Why this would require secrecy is a puzzle.

Something on the homefront? While such information should remain off limits, a simple acknowledgment from borough officials, without going into great detail, would suffice.

The council's public safety committee is scheduled to meet on Monday, and is expected to take up the O'Connell matter (although, how specific it gets, we don't know). A decision about the police chief's status will come sometime after that.

Borough officials could clear the air immediately, however, by giving residents the salient details of why O'Connell was put on leave in the first place.

They should do so. Otherwise, we wouldn't blame Mount Joy residents if they felt a little less safe these days.

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