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Contact: Gerry Cross, Executive Director, PEL
570.824.3559 pelcent@epix.net

Teri Ooms, Executive Director, The Institute
570.408.9850 ooms@institutepepa.org

The Case for Increased Police Service Levels In Luzerne County through Regional Policing

(Wilkes-Barre) The Pennsylvania Economy League (PEL) and The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development (The Institute) joined forces to analyze regional policing versus individual community policing from both a cost perspective and a presence of full time dedicated police officers. This jointly issued report uses an unusual data source – a comprehensive inventory of all municipal police services, employees, and equipment completed after the 1972 Agnes disaster—with a 2006 inventory of police forces in the 76 municipalities of Luzerne County. Using this information, PEL and The Institute are able to compare the quality of local police coverage (as defined by the number of full time police officers employed) in 1974 and in 2006. The report shows that while full time policing has remained nearly the same in the cities and has increased in townships of the second class, employment of full time officers as a percentage of officers has decreased significantly in boroughs and first class townships. Given the decline in full time officers, communities and residents are at a higher risk and with limited resources, training, and investigative crime — crime resolution is not at a high level. This study promotes regionalization of polices forces to enhance coverage across all communities in Luzerne County.

PEL Director, Gerry Cross indicated, “Since 1972 there has been a reduction of full time police protection in our oldest and most populated areas in the County and this should be of particular concern for the law abiding citizen. The reduction of full-time officers in boroughs and first class townships is especially disturbing as more people live in Luzerne County’s boroughs than in the four cities combined. Recent migration trends along with the ready availability of workforce housing in these older areas argues for an increase in the use of full time officers rather than the budget expedient method of part time police to save tax dollars. As the report indicates from 1972 to 2006, there was a significant decline in the percentage of full-time police forces serving boroughs and first class townships. These areas – especially the boroughs—can least afford a reduction in public protection through an inadequate police force.”

“Based upon the combined problems of increasing drug related crimes and the level of poverty in Luzerne County, there will be a need for improved efficiencies in crime deterrence, investigations, and arrests. Regionalization of police services in Luzerne County can result in improvements in each of these areas,” said Teri Ooms, from The Institute.

Perhaps the most important reason for a transition to regionalized police forces in Luzerne County is the loss of full-time officers in boroughs. A reduction of full-time officers serving borough forces from 57.5 percent in 1972 to 31.6 percent in 2006 poses some obvious problems, one of which is the limitation of borough departments to respond to a series of needs at a given time. Consolidating the police forces can offer improvement in responsiveness and the efficiency with which crimes are handled or prevented.