



NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: August 26, 2015

Montgomery County Readies for Papal Visit

Norristown, PA (August 26, 2015) – While the majority of the emphasis on the security, transportation, and emergency services preparation for the upcoming Papal visit to Philadelphia has been centered on the city, Montgomery County will experience significant effects from Pope Francis' visit, and county and local officials have been hard at work for months preparing plans to ensure that everything goes as smoothly as possible.

Pope Francis will be in the region on September 26 and 27 at the conclusion of the World Meeting of Families (WMOF) in Philadelphia, which runs from September 22 to 25. The Papal visit has been declared a National Special Security Event (NSSE), which places the United States Secret Service in command of security for the event.

“This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for Montgomery County and its residents to experience something as important and inspirational as a Papal visit,” said Josh Shapiro, chair of the Montgomery County Commissioners. “The eyes of the world will be on our region, and I am confident that the long term benefits of Pope Francis' visit will far outweigh the temporary inconveniences we might face. Our entire Public Safety Department and all of their local and regional partners have worked hard to help ensure inconveniences are minimized and safety is maximized.”

Pope Francis is expected to stay at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Lower Merion making Montgomery County the Pope's home away from Rome. This, along with the fact that several major roadways will be closed, thousands of people attending the WMOF and Papal events will be staying in Montgomery County, and several train stations being used by SEPTA as designated pick up stations are in the county, will significantly affect Montgomery County for the time the Pope is here.

Montgomery County and Lower Merion officials, along with emergency management, police, fire, and EMS personnel from other county municipalities have joined the Secret Service, the Philadelphia Police and Fire departments, and the Philadelphia Office of Emergency Management in planning a coordinated response effort. In all, there are more than 400 personnel from across the region, including state and federal agencies, involved in 23 different subcommittees in the planning for this event.

The strain on the transportation infrastructure could cause gridlocked traffic, particularly in the communities where the four SEPTA Regional Rail stations (Norristown, Pennbrook, and Fort Washington on the regional rail lines, and Gulph Mills on the Route 100 high speed line) that will be in operation for the visit, and along limited-access highways such as the Pennsylvania Turnpike, the Schuylkill Expressway, and portions of Routes 309 and 202 and associated roadways.

Lower Merion, in particular, will face challenges due to the closure of Route 1 (City Avenue) from Route 30 (Lancaster Avenue) to Belmont Avenue, and the closure of the Schuylkill Expressway from Route 476 into and through Philadelphia. The Department of Public Safety has been working with police, fire, EMS, and municipal emergency managers in those communities to develop Incident Action Plans, which will be coordinated regionally and with state and federal agencies.

“In addition, our team has spent a great deal of time coordinating with EMS and hospital personnel to ensure that anyone who experiences any health problems during the Pope’s visit is quickly and effectively taken care of,” said Commissioner Val Arkoosh, who is a physician and currently the interim Medical Director for the Montgomery County Health Department.

Plans call for the repositioning of resources such as variable message road signs, generators, light towers, and emergency relief supplies, such as bottled water, that can be distributed using all-terrain vehicles should long-term traffic jams develop. Plans are also being developed to provide services along the Montgomery County portion of the Schuylkill River Trail to provide for the projected heavy usage of the trail, which links with Philadelphia’s trail network.

“Our public safety personnel have put a great deal of emphasis on being nimble should gridlock or other challenges arise, and that ability to anticipate and react is key,” said Commissioner Bruce L. Castor, Jr., who serves as the commissioners’ public safety liaison.

The county will activate its Emergency Operations Center in Eagleville the morning of Friday, September 25 and keep it open through at least the morning of Monday, September 28. Montgomery

County will also have liaisons in Lower Merion, each of the four rail stations, and the federally established Multi-Agency Coordination Center and Joint Information Center.

Montgomery County will also increase staffing at its 9-1-1 Center and will activate its back-up 9-1-1 Center at the Public Safety Training Campus.

Montgomery County has filed a request for additional resources with the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency. This includes a request for 600 National Guard personnel for traffic control, crowd control, and to provide security for critical infrastructure. The county has also asked for helicopters to transport the Joint Rapid Response Teams, boats and personnel to patrol the Schuylkill River, and refueling trucks to support motorists, who may become stuck on limited access highways.

County and local personnel have participated in numerous trainings and exercises in recent months and will continue to do so in the weeks and days leading up to this event.

Residents are urged to sign up for ReadyMontco to receive emergency alerts via text messages, emails, voice calls, and the mobile app. The website for signing up is: www.readymontco.org. Everyone is asked to remain vigilant during this visit and to call 9-1-1 to report any suspicious activity.

A Papal Planning Summit to share and review county plans with all of its municipal, state, and federal partners is scheduled for 9:30 a.m. on Friday, September 11 at the Montgomery County Public Safety Training Campus, 1175 Conshohocken Road in Conshohocken.