

**TOWNSHIP OF PARSIPPANY-TROY HILLS
BOARD OF FIRE COMMISSIONERS
FIRE DISTRICT NO. 1
REGULAR MEETING
December 20th, 2023, 7:30 p.m.**

1. CALL TO ORDER

The regular meeting of the Township of Parsippany-Troy Hills Board of Fire Commissioners, Fire District No.1 was called to order at 7:33 PM by Commissioner Berry at the Tarn Drive Firehouse at 909 Tabor Road, Morris Plains, New Jersey.

2. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Commissioner Berry led the Pledge of Allegiance.

3. STATEMENT IN COMPLIANCE WITH THE OPEN PUBLIC MEETINGS ACT

This meeting is called pursuant to the provisions of the Open Public Meetings Law. This meeting of December 20, 2023 was included in a list of meetings notice sent to The Daily Record and advertised in said newspaper on December 9, 2022, posted on the bulletin board in the Parsippany-Troy Hills Municipal Building, 1001 Parsippany Boulevard, Parsippany, New Jersey and has remained continuously posted as the required notices under the statute. In addition, a copy of this notice is and has been available to the public and is on file in the office of the Township Clerk and at the Mount Tabor Fire House.

4. ROLL CALL

Commissioners present: Berry, Hazel, Jamieson, Ferdinandi, Masker

Department representation: Chief Masker

5. AGENDA REVIEW

President Berry reviewed the agenda for this meeting.

6. MINUTES FOR APPROVAL

Minutes from the regular November meeting were distributed by Commissioner Hazel to all Commissioners to review prior to this meeting. Minutes from the regular November meeting were approved via a motion by Commissioner Jamieson, seconded by Commissioner Masker, and carried by unanimous vote.

7. COMMUNICATIONS RECEIVED

No communications have been received since last meeting.

8. RESOLUTIONS:

There were resolutions presented at this meeting.

9. REPORTS

i. Treasurer's Report

The Treasurer's monthly report for December 2023 declaring operating expenses of \$51,646.24 was read and distributed for all Commissioners to review.

Significant expenses included \$9,113.10 to Spectrum Communications for replacement pagers and 30 portable radio batteries; \$7,200.00 to Dival Safety Supplies for two Blow Hard fans; 7,020.00 to NJ Casualty of NJ for Workman's compensation.

ii. Truck Report

Tower 11 - New tower coming June/July 2024.

Engine 12 - The exhaust has been repaired. Looking to spend approximately \$5,000 to expand capabilities in 2024 including more cribbing and Junkyard Dogs. Getting Quotes.
Rescue 14 - Air pump has been repaired for the 4th time. This repair seems to be holding. There is rust on all compartment doors. We will need to consider a repair quote. A quote for Engine 15's door rust was approximately \$40,000 several years ago. There is no flaking yet. Will be seeking \$1,000 for cribbing netting as part of the project for Engine 12.

Utility 16 - Would still like to pursue an \$1,800 lettering upgrade if and when funds are available.

iii. Radio Report

No assigned PPD supervisor.

iv. Insurance Report

No Report

v. Purchasing Report

No report.

vi. Fire Prevention

A letter has been written from the Joint Chiefs to the town asking about the status and purchase of a new fire prevention trailer.

vii. Joint Board Meeting Report

The meeting took place at district 4. There was nothing significant to bring back.

viii. Chief's Report

408 calls to date of which 25% have been mutual aid given.

A notable call was a 3rd alarm fire on Mechanic Street in Boonton. Boonton FD rescued 7 people and 3 dogs. The county communications truck proved to be very useful as this call.

The 1500 Littleton Road project is progressing. The old building is now down.

Mandatories and fit testing will be completed in January. Other items on the training schedule will be worked on in the coming weeks with the new office.

Exploring new software for policy and training management. Will present quotes.

Manpower continues to be an issue is an issue. Member average of calls is 29% before still alarms and 37% overall. We are averaging 8 members per call (not all of whom are interior). We are averaging 5.7 members on apparatus per call.

We have tried different iterations of the shift schedule. We will try a 4th version in January based on the input from the new officers at the meeting next week since there has not been an overwhelming success with the current and previous iterations of the incentive programs.

10. INVITATION FOR PUBLIC COMMENT

There were several dozen attendees at this meeting consisting of District 1 taxpayers, District 1 residents, as well as current and former members of the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department.

President Berry began this portion of the meeting describing a recent letter sent to District 1 registered voter households regarding the 2024 fire district budget and initiative to hire per diem staffing. He described that the intent was to engage and inform the community before the February 2024 election which traditionally has low voter turnout.

President Berry recapped some of the results of an informal survey sent to Fire District 1 voter households in which the Commissioners asked voters for feedback regarding their support for the budget. At the time of this meeting, there were 98 responses in favor of 2024 fire district budget and initiative to hire per diem staffing and 53 responses against this the budget and initiative.

President Berry addressed several recurring themes from the survey responses up front including: 1) there are a greater proportion of calls during the 6:00am to 6:00pm weekday time frame than the remainder of the week, 2) we are using mutual aid, 3) recruitment efforts are being pursued, and 4) this initiative would target an approximate 5 minute reduction in average response time for our first due engine.

An attendee shared that the Paid Chief position to manage per diem firefighters is a problem and that four firefighters on a shift is not going to solve the problem. This attendee suggested that the additional administrative work would be approximately 15 hours per week and that the commissioners are jumping the gun. This attendee suggested sharing this burden among all 6 districts asking, "Why is it up to District 1 to do this?". This attendee indicated that per diem firefighters would come from other districts who are already running short and that these are the responders are relied on in their current capacity to assist with significant incidents.

Another attendee shared that the Board of Fire Commissioners is not the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department and that the logo used in the District's communication to the voter households is a problem. This attendee shared that the letter claims the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department has difficulty manning calls and that there was coordination between the district and the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department but that these claims are false with it being evident that the commissioners had been working on this for months behind the backs of constituents. This attendee indicates that there are no statistics to support this initiative. This attendee is troubled that the details provide no salary numbers for the proposed paid chief and that such numbers need to be known to determine if we would be paying a chief fairly. This attendee expanded on the tax increase and that taxes would rise in subsequent years to support the continuation of this program. This attendee stated that the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department has a chief who is a volunteer who can be voted out annually in the event of bad leadership. This attendee claims that a rift will be created between firefighters who are paid and firefighters who are volunteers. This attendee highlighted that this \$640,000 initiative would be to support an average of one call per day and there is uncertainty on whether a Chief hired by government officials would allow the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department to attend community outreach events.

Another attendee understands the problem the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department is having but cautions that this solution is a slippery slope toward a more fully paid fire department. This attendee indicated that the District's initiative is not a practical solution because the likely candidates for per diem firefighters would draw from the current pool of volunteer firefighters and due to the management difficulties. This attendee asked whether the other 5 districts have this same problem, how they are managing, and if they are waiting District 1 for a solution. There was a discussion on the recent PILOT programs. It was stated that many of the new developments are in District 6. This attendee closed stating that this problem needs to be addressed townwide and in a long-term way.

Another attendee was concerned with the lack of details provided for this plan, particularly the total number of per diem employees expected to be hired. This attendee also questioned the details behind the attempts at recruitment and information on the current incentive program. This attendee cited that other districts are immediately dispatched with mutual aid and asked why District 1 is not being more aggressive here. This attendee does not believe this has been well planned given the costs to cover one of six districts in this town indicating that a paid Chief might be justified townwide but not one for district.

Another attendee questioned whether the proposed Chief role will be a civil service position and asked what mechanisms are in place to avoid nepotism. This attendee was concerned with level of details shared in the District's letter to taxpayer households and the time frame with which to comment before the election and indicated that the few people typically voting in these elections. This resident inquired what was happening with the other Chief's and departments. This resident also stated that some recipients of the districts thought it was a fundraising letter and that the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire department received donations from it. This attendee does believe a paid chief is going to make a difference in the volunteers but doesn't believe the district is ready for this initiative.

Another attendee stated his trust in another attendee who is a district taxpayer, district resident and current member of the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department. This attendee thinks we're trying to do what's best for the community but that "The cart is before the horse" with respect to this initiative and doesn't agree with the proposed initiative. This attendee stated that the problem is volunteers and suggested more incentivization for volunteers.

Another attendee understands where the commissioners are coming from but indicates the underlying problem's solution should not over burden the taxpayers of district one and must be dealt with more broadly across the town, county, or state citing what the town and county have done with EMS. This attendee indicates that the current average response per call is greater than the proposed per diem staffing and questions what will be gained given who might be hired and that this could jeopardize responses on nights and weekends. This attendee closes stating that the commissioners have done as much as they can to incentivize the members to go to more calls but that this initiative is not the right way to move forward.

Another attendee is totally against this proposed initiative. This attendee suggested that the District is not using mutual enough and part of the reason was due to the relationship between Chiefs. This attendee also pointed to hearing other towns dispatching all town companies to obtain enough manpower for calls during the day. This attendee was upset with the decision to sell the old Tower 11 before receipt of the new Tower on order specifically for Gates Court. This attendee indicated that a paid Chief could hurt responses and that a secretary to assist with administrative responsibilities should have been hired two years ago.

Another attendee understands the issue the commissioners are trying to solve, but cautions that three or four per diem firefighters does not meet the requirements of 2 in 2 out and that such a force cannot work in building on fire unless there is an immediate life hazard inside that building. This attendee questions how overtime will work since firefighters cannot be paid and volunteer for the same organization. This attendee believes this initiative is being rushed with poor communication to the membership and the public.

Another attendee considers the district figure of 400 calls per year remarkably low for paid staffing and doesn't agree with the statistical justification behind this initiative given the number of calls received within these hours and the split between member

average responders at weekday calls versus during nights and weekends. This attendee shared the following statistics: There were 171 calls during the daytime hours, 50 of which were mutual aid and that the average response has 5.2 members on trucks going out the door. This attendee was disappointed that these statistics had not been part of the decision making leading to this initiative and is concerned that not enough information has been shared to the public and the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department.

Another attendee indicated he had voted yes on the budget and takes direction from another attendee who is a district taxpayer, district resident and current member of the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department. This attendee is not inherently opposed to this initiative, but believes it is rushed. This attendee has no problem with the District solving the problems it's impacted by but suggests that the issue is more complicated than the plan which has communicated is able to solve. This attendee believes that the current ambiguity and potential missteps will lose needed community support.

Another resident indicated that there is not much transparency on what the root issue is and whether it stems from ability to get volunteers trained or the lack of volunteers. Clarity was provided that the statistics provided do not indicate whether all responders responding to calls are interior firefighters. It was also confirmed that there are a lot of dependable members who show up, but they cannot be asked to work in a structure fire unless they meet state requirements at a minimum.

It was stated that approximately 1.5 people have joined the department in the last 2 years. This ".5" statistics was later clarified to represent the concept that one of the two new applicants had already been trained thus would not be burdened by initial firefighter training.

The training load for Mount Tabor Volunteer Firefighters was described as several sessions a month of ongoing department training on top of more than 200 hours of initial certification training. It was stated that approximately five interested persons per year decline to pursue membership in the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department due to the time commitment required for training.

Another attendee states that there is not a clear enough understanding of the need for this initiative and a lack of information to support this initiative. This attendee believes the way initiative has been brought forward has caused a rift between members of the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department and that February is an inappropriate timeline given insufficient information provided to constituents. This attendee states most voters will likely vote to pass this budget and fund this initiative but that such a vote is an uninformed decision.

Another attendee identified as being in favor of this initiative supports the need for more statistics and suggests that the concern should focus on mitigating potential risks. This attendee also indicates that that a 13-minute response with inadequate staffing is troubling.

Another attendee questioned why the district is still using the county for dispatching claiming a 2-3 minutes in delay per incident and additional costs to use the county versus Parsippany for dispatching services.

Commissioner Berry responded to several of the issues mentioned to this point:

Management of paid staffing was deemed too burdensome for a volunteer and that a clerk or administrator would lack needed authority on all issues that would arise. Merging operational authority with administrative responsibilities in a Chief position had been thought to be the most effective way to manage these issues. Several responses from the audience cited that other towns, such as Dover, do have a volunteer fire chief managing paid staff and that the administrative burden rests with the Board of Fire Commissioners.

The communication to district taxpayers was put forward with the intent to further develop and receive feedback before voting as well as to further define the plan within 2024 before implementing in the latter half the year. This plan was and is debatable until the ballots are printed.

Community outreach events would not be reduced under a Paid Chief. President Berry would not comment on other Districts' behalf with respect to how they are handling declining volunteers.

The Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department has relied on Mutual Aid for over 100 years. However, we cannot only receive mutual aid. We have been aggressive on both requesting and supplying mutual aid. This additional call volume has increased the time commitment burden on members of the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire department. These agreements are continually developing among chiefs to support the needs of the community and balance the burden that increased call volume has on volunteer firefighters.

The commissioners are following all requirements related to election notifications and advertisements.

This budget and initiative put forward can still be edited and is meant to develop over the course of 2024.

With respect to incentivization, the incentive budget has continued to grow over the years from dinners to shirts to paying per call. The incentive program would not go away under the proposed budget.

With respect to Civil Service questions, while the town fulfills positions through Civil the Service commission, the district is not required to follow the same as per direct feedback from the Civil Service Commission. The current initiative would target the Chief's role to receive no pension for a trial period. Several items with respect to Pension and Civil service were raised in response to this including the suspicion that pension eligibility for the proposed Chief's position and Civil Service appointments would prohibit members of the Mount Tabor

Volunteer Fire Department who are part of the FMBA union from serving the District. It was also stated that once pension enrollment is initiated, an employee is eligible from the date of hire. It was also stated that several combinations departments are not Civil Service but are in the pension system.

Another attendee was concerned with the lack of a job description. The room responded negatively when explained that the job description would develop over the course of 2024.

Another attendee mentioned that there were many members of the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department in attendance who joined to be volunteers and that “the money’s gotten out of control”.

The Board responded that this initiative is not asking the volunteers to go away but aims to support their efforts during weekday hours. An attendee commented that the volunteers would not be responding as much if others are getting paid.

Another attendee indicated that the focus seems to be on paperwork related to hiring per diems and that the next step should be an administrator. The Board responded that the volunteer Chief is expected to commit approximately 25 hours per week between responses, meetings, training and administrative work to support reporting in the volunteer roll’s current capacity.

The Board described more details that had been drafted with respect to this initiative including that 30-40 per diems would be sought to cover four person shifts to handle the bulk of alarms during the day and have volunteers and mutual aid called with more significant dispatches and incidents. The board stated the aim with the getting a head of the problem of dwindling volunteerism as a concern on observations of the demographics of this district, specifically the typical occupations and hours worked required to afford to live in this District. Many of these demographic observations were revealed through direct response to a recruitment survey sent via electronic means.

Another attendee suggested that a Chief position would be appropriate for the whole town given the scale and within the resources currently available across all 6 districts with potential staffing being implemented townwide to supplement volunteer fire company responses. This attendee indicated that the Board’s current proposal would be quite lopsided and might encourage other districts to spend similarly without coordination. This attendee also suggested that filling chief and deputy chief positions across all six districts precludes these most dedicated and experienced individuals from operating in firefighter capacity due to the need to manage incidents in support of his earlier position that a paid chief for entire would be appropriate.

The Chief speaking on behalf of the Board addressed recruiting restrictions in the High School stating that a past principal of the local high school would not allow the fire departments in the school including an offer to sponsor a paid assembly program with speakers who are survivors of the Seaton Hall University dormitory fire. We did not have any follow-up from representatives of the School District and had meetings postponed several times.

Another attendee stated that more details were needed, specifically rationale beyond the current ambiguous statistics, a better understanding of the longer-term expense in subsequent years, and job descriptions.

Commissioner Masker detailed all expenses and estimates used to get to the current proposed budget number including estimated officer and firefighter hourly pay, the salary and benefits of the chief's position, overtime assumptions with Defined Contribution Retirement Program contributions, as well as uniform and PPE expenses to support four interior firefighters on an apparatus onsite and ready to respond to incidents.

Another attendee questioned how a per diem chief and officer structure would work alongside the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department indicating that this would damage the moral of the Volunteer Fire department.

Another attendee asked why these details were not part of the communication sent to district taxpayer households.

Another attendee requested specifics related to authority at an incident. The response indicated rank and time to scene would guide the initial response with National Incident Management Principles guiding further transfers of command.

Another attendee suggested that this is not the appropriate time to move forward and that perhaps this could be attempted in future budgets.

Another attendee stated that the room has indicated that they are not in favor of this initiative as part of the 2024 budget. It was also pointed out that several attendees in the room are members of the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department and this should be a consideration when weighing the opinion of the room.

Commissioner Masker referenced the positive response ratio from the district communication to the taxpayer households and that the Commissioners we are meant to support the taxpayers.

Commissioner Ferdinandi summed up several concerns heard through this public session including the limited time to implementation and that such concerns against this initiative are coming from engaged taxpayers in this room where other responses on our survey may be uninformed.

An attendee questioned the validity of the survey responses, specifically that people may have replied twice. This was responded with the metric that 70 of the majority positive responses provided a valid email address we can engage while ten 10 of the minority negative responses provided an email. We also only received few suggestions in the feedback portion of our survey, all of which we are already doing or are outside of our jurisdiction to implement (e.g. townwide fire services).

Two other attendees asked what will kill this initiative if we wait another year or two and stated that we do not need to rush to put it in for this February. Several other attendees confirmed this position and added that more information is needed.

Another attendee is fed up with response times to call 911 and sit on hold for the county dispatcher, has written numerous letters on this, and would like an official response from the commissioners.

The Board was given indication that several of the current members of the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department would apply for a per diem position as part of this initiative and that we would establish a preference for in district and in town applicants with firefighting experience, not just current Members of the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department. Additionally, this initiative has been pursued with the understanding that the Mount Tabor Volunteer Fire Department would continue operating in the fullest capacity it can.

Another attendee stated that his wife threw out the letter, that a lot of people are not informed on this matter, and that more budget details should have been put on this communication.

Another attendee stated that the communication sent to voter households seems to have engaged more voters than a typical commissioner election and that there needs to be more contact with respect to this.

Another attendee is not surprised at the positive response ratio received and states that the letter reads like the following, "If you don't do this your house is going to burn down".

11. APPROVAL OF BILLS PAYABLE

A motion to pay pending bills was made by Commissioner Ferdinandi, seconded by Commissioner Jamieson, and carried by unanimous vote.

12. EXECUTIVE SESSION

An executive session took place after all public comments were heard.

13. OLD BUSINESS

A resident and taxpayer had requested a response related to the dispatching delay concerns and expenses brought up in the public comment session. It was confirmed that the total expense related to county dispatching is \$12,000 versus the \$20,000 to \$30,000 cost supposed by the public and that the largest expense is for radio licensing which would still likely exist if we were to use Parsippany for dispatching. Time delays are a concern that has been discussed among the commissioners due to exceptional instances observed among our own members calling 911, however specific statistics related to the time lost in the transfer of the call from Parsippany to the county are not consistently available.

Without specific statistics, the Commissioners have been guided by the operational expertise of the Chief's office which has recommended maintaining dispatching service through the County citing a lack of consistency with which Parsippany Dispatchers adhere to standard operating procedures directly observed in the role they play in our current 911 process. There is also a significant operational burden in transitioning dispatching agencies and the commissioners have taken the general stance that they will not dictate specific operational requirements.

The length of time taken to process 911 calls was used to compare the quality of standardized call taking procedures was also used to consider a formalized understanding of a 2-3 minute delay in optimal circumstances. Exceptional call experiences were highlighted citing a 6 minute delay for a neighboring jurisdiction's recent incident through the County dispatching and lack of adequate response as to why this exception occurred.

The Chief agreed to pursue text messaging from Parsippany for advanced alerts on incoming calls as is the case with another County Dispatched Parsippany Fire District. The commissioners will follow up and provide assistance to this pursuit as needed.

14. NEW BUSINESS

The Commissioners will not adopt the budget as currently introduced. A new budget excluding funding for the initiative to provide for a paid chief, per diem staffing and associated expenses will be drafted. New meeting nights will be advertised. Incentive uncertain.

A motion to not adopt the 2024 budget as currently drafted was made by Commissioner Ferdinandi, seconded by Commissioner Jamieson and passed by a 4-1 majority vote with Commissioner Masker dissenting.

A motion to adjourn was made by Commissioner Jamieson, seconded by Commissioner Ferdinandi and passed without dissent.

Respectfully Submitted,

Gerard Hazel

Commissioner