

Tulpehocken Township Board of Supervisors
Workshop Meeting for Fire and Emergency Service Tax
Wednesday, April 24, 2024

In attendance at this workshop meeting from Tulpehocken Township were Supervisors Gary Deck, Lester Feick and Harold Zimmerman; Secretary Kathy Judy and Township Solicitor Atty. Michelle Mayfield. Also present were representatives from Bethel Ambulance Service, Western Berks EMS, Keystone Fire Company of Rehrersburg and Mt. Aetna Fire and Rescue: Anthony Tucci, Curvin Martin, Fred Kreiser, Bob Conner and Alan Bashore.

The workshop began with the pledge to the flag.

Introduction:

- Gary Deck announced that we want to try to get some facts. Municipalities have a responsibility to have emergency service for their residents, so we want to make sure that we be ahead of it and to make sure that we keep it. Tulpehocken Supervisors, at meeting when there happened to be audience, brought up an emergency services tax, just to get a feel for public opinion. So far it's been pretty positive.

Ambulance Services Information:

- Tulpehocken Township is serviced by Bethel (volunteer and paid volunteer) for Basic Life Support service and Western Berks (paid staff) for Advanced and Paramedic services.
- Most of the EMS providers in Berks County are non-profit operations. With the exception of Tower Direct and Life Line
- Paid EMS salaries are lower than salaries for other emergency services. And in 2012 there were approximately 30,000 EMSs; today it's down to 17,000.

Ambulance Billing & Financial:

- Yes, EMS can bill insurance, but it cannot recover nearly what it costs to operate and are closing out their years in the red.
- An average call is about six hundred to eight hundred dollars, but are only reimbursed \$300 to \$400, no one is covering the difference. With the exception of Life Line and Tower Direct, EMS must collect the insurance payments from the patient. Non-members of the EMS service are then billed for any unpaid balance.
- And no one covers the cost of just having an ambulance and crew ready to be able to respond to a call.
- Western Berks is currently receiving support from seven municipalities: West Reading, Wyomissing, Spring, Sinking Spring, Lower Heidelberg, South Heidelberg, Wernersville and most recently Wyomissing just came on this year at \$45 to \$50 a household.
- Bethel EMS and Western Berks do have a billing/mutual aid agreement. When Western Berks responds to a call for Bethel, Bethel does the billing for them; the two companies have a good relationship with that.

EMS and Fire Services Hardships:

- Both EMS and fire services are facing a crisis. Added mandates that are unfunded are a big part of this. They're now starting to come out with OSHA and the 1910-156 changes from the fire brigade to emergency response and it's lumping all fire service and EMS into one bunch. Whether paid or volunteer, they're starting to put requirements in that a lot of departments are

not going to be able to absorb, like NFPA required physicals. (Spring Township pays \$1,000 a person to do an NFPA compliant physical). Required certifications to be an interior firefighter. Required certifications to be an officer. Regular training like 24 continued education credits to keep your EMT, Evok, Fire 2. The costs for classes and required programs are 10-20 times what they were in 1990. The fire company and EMT services absorb the costs, but this is also hours away from home or in front of the computer and are unpaid hours for volunteers (Fire 1 is 183 hours to go through).

- State Representatives need to be called to help to start making it better for EMS and for fire. If they want all that stuff, they're going to have to help fund it. In state law it comes down under the township code and under the borough code that boroughs and municipalities are responsible for fire and police and emergency services and funding them appropriately to the means necessary.

Funding for Emergency Services:

- The tax, if put in place, would pay EMS for a municipal wide-subscription and taxpayers will have membership and the benefit of not being billed for anything over what the carrier pays. Currently there are approximately 30 of the 70 municipalities making the municipal wide subscription. If the tax is put in place, membership drive letters wouldn't be sent out. Other fundraisers like car show and chicken barbeques can still be held (and maybe even donation drives, but that will need to be looked into). If we can come to a conclusion and feel sure it is right before we put it in place, our goal is to get paperwork done in time to have it in place for the 2025 tax bills.
- As a different approach, some municipalities have created municipal authorities (sometimes a joint authority serving several municipalities), similar to a sewer or water municipal authority, for an EMS Service. Theirs are run by officials that are appointed to it. They are separate entities from the municipality, with their own funds, billing and taxing authority. It took the municipality off the hook from taxing for emergency services because it was the authority that billed for EMS, almost like a sewer user fee.
- Whether done as a millage or a flat pass through fee, depending on a property's classification/use/number or units, etc., there may be differences on how/when an EMS is best levied and that will likely be different as compared to a millage for fire services.

Future Planning:

- Task list and additional information needed:
 - o % of property assessment taxes that are actually collected, to help determine a more accurate expected return on whatever millage amounts are proposed
 - o Ask the County for an updated number on residences/households
 - o Find out if a flat pass through fee is an option vs. mills
 - o Confirm amount Bethel Ambulance charges for a household membership and the number of subscriptions it receives
 - o Look into run card information and other means to determine how best to split funds distribution between the two Fire Companies
 - o Find examples of exemptions or credit for active volunteers
 - o Next workshop will be on Wednesday, May 15, 2024 at 6:30 PM.