

Tulpehocken Township Board of Supervisors
Public Workshop Meeting for Fire and Emergency Service Tax
Wednesday, August 21, 2024

This Workshop Meeting was held in the Boardroom at the Tulpehocken Area School District Office located at 27 Rehrersburg Road, Tulpehocken Township. In attendance from Tulpehocken Township were Supervisors Gary Deck, Lester Feick and Harold Zimmerman; Secretary Kathy Judy, Tax Collector Lori Deck and Township Solicitor Atty. Michelle Mayfield. Representatives from Bethel Ambulance Service, Western Berks EMS, Keystone Fire Company of Rehrersburg and Mt. Aetna Fire and Rescue included: Laverne Frey, Robert Conner, Kirk Merkey, Leonard Mays, Zach Batdorf, Fred Kreiser, Mike Bashore, and Anthony Tucci.

Other Public in attendance included:

Sylvan Wittmer *	Harry Reinhold *	Corvin Martin *
Gary Keener *	Kirk Merkey *	Heather Hanna
Dr. Ed Hanna	Jayne Seifrit	Joshua Bollinger
Sheila Hess	Burt Wessner	Heather Wessner
Michelle Hamm	George Field	Amanda Sholly
Rick Kramer	Nate River	Brian Haag
Samuel Forry	Brenda Fabich	Shannon Roof
Ron Snyder	Jean Snyder	Gail Malsbury
Daryl Martin	Ruth Sholl	

(*Fire Company Volunteers)

Chairman Deck called the Workshop to order at 6:30 P.M.

The workshop began with the pledge to the flag.

Introduction:

Chairman Deck welcomed everyone and thanked them for attending.

He took a moment to recognize and thank the crews that responded to the accident and subsequent fire in Mt. Aetna.

The Chairman stated that:

- the Board of Supervisors has met with the Ambulance and Fire Companies to fact find and determine what for funding we should look at and what is needed.
- the purpose of the Workshop is to share that information and then open it up for comments, have discussions, hear feedback and try to answer any questions.

There were introductions of the Township, EMS and Fire Company Representatives seated at the tables. Information they shared included:

Ambulance Services:

- the Township is looking at starting a half a mil tax to help fund the ambulance service
- in lieu taxpayers in the Township would be a member and wouldn't have to pay an enrollment fee for membership
- Bethel Community Ambulance (BCA) stated that the Township contacted them about the tax.
- some history on the BCA and information about changes in staffing, operational costs and membership and revenues;
- Western Berks EMS explained that they are the advanced life support (ALS) service to the paramedics. They respond to assist Bethel when ALS may be required, on calls that are

severe in nature and sometimes provide coverage acting as both BLS/ALS. Western Berks and Bethel have a billing agreement and each accepts the other's memberships.

General:

- discussion on rising costs and explanation about proposed OSHA changes and the impact that will have;
- that under law, the Township is required to provide emergency services to its residents;

Fire Companies:

- that Mt. Aetna Fire Company made a motion for the record in their minutes, that they oppose instituting this tax.
- Rehrersburg does cost more to fund than Mt. Aetna. The differences between the two respectively are: number of calls is 77%, 23%; number of apparatus they each have and maintain is 63%, 37%, the coverage area and the number of taxable parcels is 61%, 39% and the assessed values of those is 63%, 37% of the total taxable assessed values. No matter which way you look at it, the difference between the two is pretty consistent.
- the Township is looking at a 1.0 or 1.1 mil tax to help fund the fire companies. What is allowed to be done is 3.0 mils.
- in 2024 the Township is giving a \$48,000 donation total to the fire companies. If this tax is put in place, the donation would no longer be allocated to the fire companies and that \$48,000 will remain in the General Fund for the Township
- a suggestion had been made at the previous workshop, that the Township increase the current tax mils and annual donation amount, instead of starting a new tax; the Board feels it would be more appropriate to call it what it is; a tax to fund the emergency services.
- the Township will be audited and will require accountability from the fire companies on spending of the funds; which was an inquiry made at the previous workshop.

A Public Comment & Discussion Period was then opened Below are the comments, suggestions and questions from the audience. Discussions were held on each point raised:

- Can't this be paid by a higher per-capita instead of by mil on assessed value?
- What happens if or when a volunteer fire company or ambulance service has no choice but to close its doors?
- There are other municipalities that have emergency services taxes in place, some for many years. Residents that move here may not know that it is not part of or included in the taxes they are paying. That may be part of why donations are not higher.
- What part of tax money leaves the Township or helps fund our providers that serve other municipalities? Where exactly would the tax dollars be going?
- For the average household it would not be an unreasonable amount to have to pay in order to have local emergency service response available. If we did not have the volunteer fire companies the amount would be much higher. The amount paid will be highest for the farmers in the Township because of the farms' higher assessment values.
- Do the fire companies have matching or compatible equipment?
- Would there be any type of installment or payment plan available?
- Which fire company is responsible for responding is determined by where the property is physically located and not by what the property owners mailing address may be.
- Are the EMS and Fire Companies receiving money from the other neighboring municipalities they may respond to calls in? Do any of the neighboring municipalities have an emergency services tax in place?
- How many mil does the Townships current annual donations to emergency services equate to?

- If the tax is put in place, how will the Ambulance Services billing company know that the resident is a member?
- How will the Fire Companies account for how the funds are utilized?
- Are there any grants available for ambulance and fire companies? And would this funding impact that?
- How would the fire tax be split between the two fire companies?
- What would be required of the Board of Supervisors if they were to decide to increase the tax in the future?
- For reference, it was reported that a paid Fire Company's cost for salary, benefits and insurance for one fire fighter is \$120,000 per year. That multiplied by at least four fire fighters per shift with 24 hour coverage would come to \$1 – 1 ½ Million.
- When would the Board of Supervisors go to vote on the matter?
- Suggestion that disagreements about which fire company has more money and which has more expenses needs to stop. And residents need to stop expecting a service for free and instead should think about the risk that EMS and Fire are put in when they respond to a call. We need to start helping them to have what they need, the proper gear, the property equipment, the proper apparatus and support them so they can provide the service that everyone is expecting.
- Suggestion that Rehrersburg Social Club is not up to standards; it should upgrade and remodel to generate more business and make more money.
- Suggestion that the tax needs to be put in place, otherwise we will be talking about a much bigger tax mill. Fundraisers are not going to be enough to pay expenses or buy a fire truck. Nobody likes a tax, but the fact of the matter is they are our taxes; we are in a building paid for by our taxes and we'll leave and drive home on roads paid for by our taxes. This is all about our community and taking care of our community that we have to invest in.
- If the tax is put in place, will Mount Aetna be supportive by tracking and providing the Township with information on volunteers' activity in order to help them qualify to receive a tax credit?
- Comment that we can be grateful to the Board of Supervisors for the time they put in and their commitment to being fair. The additional cost is fair for the peace of mind that emergency services are available; just be sure that the money is being spent the way it should be. For some the tax will be a financial burden.
- How much was the deficit for Rehrersburg Fire Company in 2023?
- Recommendation was made that the Tax Collector not receive compensation on the collection of Emergency Services Tax funds
- Thanks was extended to the Fire Police for their service and the many hours they volunteer in that role.

The Board of Supervisors will plan to discuss this further at their Preliminary Budget Meeting in September.

With no additional comments or questions from the audience, *Chairman Deck motioned to adjourn the meeting at 8:25 P.M. - - seconded by Vice Chairman Feick and passed unanimously (3-0).*

The Workshop Meeting was adjourned at 8:30 P.M.

Respectfully Submitted,

Kathy Judy, Secretary
Tulpehocken Township