

**Special Joint Meeting  
With Millcreek Township Fire and EMS Commission**

**September 26, 2022**

The special joint public meeting of the Millcreek Township Board of Supervisors and the Millcreek Township Fire and EMS Commission was called to order at 6:00 p.m. by Chairman Daniel Ouellet in the Assembly Room of the Millcreek Township Municipal Building. Present were Daniel Ouellet, James Bock, Kim Clear, Mark Shaw, Esq., Sheryl Williams, and Fire and EMS Commissioners Jim Rosenbaum, William Martin, Matthew Parker, Kirk McCaslin, Jeremy Moreland, Guy Santone, John Marsden and Randy Lachowski.

Following the Pledge to the Flag, Mr. Ouellet asked the Commissioners to introduce themselves.

Solicitor Mark Shaw explained that the special joint meeting was requested by the Supervisors in response to the Fire Commission's recommendations to hire full-time firefighters, hire a full-time Fire Chief, and to hire a consultant to assist with the consolidation process of the Township's fire departments. Mr. Shaw gave a PowerPoint presentation on the history of the Township's volunteer fire departments: Belle Valley, Kearsarge, West Lake and West Ridge. He noted that Lake Shore Fire Department is also located in Millcreek Township and serves a portion of the Township, but it is joining Fairview Fire Department. Mr. Shaw stated that Millcreek's fire departments were traditionally funded by donations and staffed by volunteers, but across Pennsylvania the number of volunteers has dropped drastically since 1975, while the call volume has increased, and thus the longstanding model of volunteer firefighting is no longer sustainable.

Mr. Shaw reported as follows: In 2008, the Township occasionally provided paving, plowing and use of Township fuel pumps and in 2009 began allocating funds from the Local Services Tax (LST) to the fire departments. Currently, the fire departments receive approximately \$670,000 in total of the LST monies annually and \$270,000 annually from the state's foreign insurance tax for each department's relief fund, which can only be spent as dictated by the state. In 2017, the Fire and Emergency Services (EMS) Commission was formed to help address the challenges confronted by the fire departments, to assist the Supervisors in providing the best and most cost-effective emergency services to the Township, and to promote cooperation and collaboration among the fire departments. Since its inception, the Fire and EMS Commission has worked with the Township to standardize fire department financial records and capital funding requests, and to gain approval to use Township fueling stations and receive basic maintenance of fire department vehicles. In 2018, the Township also passed law providing local tax relief to fire department volunteers and conducted marketing evaluation to assist in fundraising. In addition, the Township purchased recordkeeping software to standardize fire department financial records.

Mr. Shaw stated that the Supervisors met and discussed the Fire Commission's recommendations and propose the following:

7-8 Full Time Paid Firefighters with benefits, employed by West Ridge or a unified fire department organization, possibly supplemented with paid part-time staff and/or volunteer staffing who would receive a stipend. Call data would determine the location and number of firefighters needed per shift.

Mr. Shaw explained that funding would be split equally among the four (4) fire departments and would come from LST (Local Service Tax), the Relief Fund, donations, and from the Township. He relayed that the Township is considering \$500,000 in additional funding to fire departments, as well as accepting responsibility for remaining loans on vehicles in exchange for the titles to the vehicles. The Township is also considering purchase of future fire vehicles to be

leased back to the fire departments, who would assume responsibility for upkeep and maintenance.

Mr. Shaw closed his presentation by stating the Township feels it is premature to hire a Fire Chief at this time but would consider hiring a consultant to assist with fire department consolidation, and recommended retaining Nicholas W. Sohyda, Fire Chief, EFO, CFO of Mt. Lebanon Fire Department, who prepared the Standard of Cover for the Township and Fire and EMS Commission.

Jim Rosenbaum, Commission Chair and West Ridge Fire Chief, thanked the Supervisors for the time and effort that they have put into this concept, and thanked the members of the Fire Commission also for forging ahead for the past five years.

John Marsden, Citizen Representative, asked if the hiring of full-time firefighters would be coordinated by West Ridge or a committee, to which Mr. Shaw explained that this needs to be determined, but due to time constraints and the fact that West Ridge already has a hiring process in place, it may make sense for West Ridge to do the hiring. Randy Lachowski, Citizen Representative, suggested that a project manager may be needed to coordinate this effort.

Kirk McCaslin, Commissioner and West Lake Fire Chief, asked what the timeline is to implement this concept, to which Mr. Ouellet replied they are hoping for early 2023. Mr. Shaw stated that in order to get the needed staffing hired and with the upcoming holidays, it may be more realistic to try for January or February of 2023.

Mr. Marsden then summarized how the funding would occur as a combination of relief funds, LST, department reserves, donations and Township funding, which Mr. Shaw confirmed. Mr. Marsden asked what will happen if fire departments do not give their fair share. Mr. Shaw explained that agreements would be drawn up between the Township and each fire department to outline the requirements, but emphasized joint cooperation is essential to the process.

Chief Rosenbaum stated that the Fire Commission's desire is to move forward with consolidation to improve efficiency and for financial reasons as well. Mr. Shaw replied that a higher level of cooperation will only strengthen the process, and the only way this plan will be successful is if all of the fire departments work together and think of themselves as one "Millcreek Township Fire Department."

Mr. Marsden expressed concern that once this process begins there is no turning back and asked if there is an alternative plan in the event the Township cannot afford it. Mr. Shaw replied that there is no alternative plan because the Fire Commission has recommended consolidation and this concept has been thoroughly researched to accrue accurate data and numbers to make the decision to proceed. Mr. Lachowski opined that although the numbers may change, working together will increase efficiency and it is the right thing to do.

Matt Parker, Commissioner and Kearsarge Fire Chief, relayed that at the last Operations Subcommittee meeting, there was discussion about whether to push this through quickly or take our time so that there is no back door, and that the Fire Chief and full-time staff be Township employees. He emphasized that manpower has been a big issue for many years. Mr. Ouellet responded by saying that the Township is not trying to slam this concept through, but the mechanism is here and we need to be proactive to get ahead of the manpower issue.

Charlie Hefner, 5931 Grubb Road, stated that he has been a volunteer firefighter for almost 50 years and that the consolidation must be done as soon as possible because staffing is a real

problem. He explained that he was one of the strong supporters for paid staff at West Ridge because more young firefighters are desperately needed.

Jeffrey Skonieczki, Belle Valley President, asked if there is a budget for the first 3 years of the consolidation because he opined that the total funds needed would actually be \$1.3 or \$1.4 million dollars. He stated that building repairs, equipment, manpower and training have not been taken into account, and having 8 firefighters at a fire is not enough. He reported that Belle Valley pays a stipend to its staff based on the number of calls the firefighter responds to. He added that the state recommends 1.1 firefighters per capita, and Millcreek Township currently has only 70 firefighters.

Mr. Lachowski asked the Board how to define the next step? Mr. Shaw suggested that the Fire Commission could possibly meet earlier than their regular October 20<sup>th</sup> meeting date to discuss this concept and make their recommendations to the Supervisors. Mr. Shaw noted that cooperation of all fire departments is needed, and when information is requested from the Supervisors, the fire departments need to respond quickly.

Chief Rosenbaum reiterated the Fire Commission's support, and suggested that the Commission break up into small groups to work on different areas concurrently so that the plan can be implemented in 2023. He would like to know if Chief Sohyda has past experience in implementing consolidation and if he has encountered any pitfalls. He stated that the Fire Commission will act to submit their plan and recommendation to the Supervisors. Mr. Shaw reminded them that the Township's 2023 budget process is in full swing and decisions will need to be made in November for fire department funding.

Mr. Marsden expressed concern as to how volunteer firefighters can be legally paid and if the Firefighters Union will approach the Township about this. Mr. Shaw replied that the Township must carefully monitor salaries paid to volunteers, but that by law they may receive up to 20% of what full-time regular firefighters earn. He stated that union intervention is always a risk with full-time staff, but the 501c3 will be the employer and not the Township.

Ms. Clear thanked the Fire Commissioners and volunteer firefighters in attendance for their service and is looking forward to becoming "Millcreek Township Fire Department."

There being no further business to come before the Board or any other Citizens to be Heard, it was moved by Ms. Clear and seconded by Mr. Bock to adjourn the meeting at 6:45 p.m.

Sheryl A. Williams  
Township Secretary

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APPROVED: October 11, 2022

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Daniel P. Ouellet

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Kim Clear

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James S. Bock