

# Planning for the Future of Fire & EMS Services

The following information seeks to keep residents informed regarding fire and EMS services provided by the Township.



## 1. What is the Township’s goal for fire and emergency medical services (“EMS”)?

The Board of Supervisors (“Board”) has identified fire and EMS services as a core public service and has established a goal to provide these services on a 24/7 basis to Township residents and businesses. In addition to providing 24/7 coverage, it is the Board’s desire to ensure these services are delivered using the Township’s current model consisting of a combination career-volunteer department that is consistent with an acceptable Standard of Cover set by the National Fire Protection Association (“NFPA”).

## 2. What level of service is provided by the Township currently?

Currently, career firefighters provide fire and EMS services Monday through Friday from 7:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. Coverage is also provided by members of the Volunteer Fire Department (“VFD”) pursuant to an agreement for services. Services are delivered from two fire stations, Pancake (limited basis) and from the Oak Spring station. Because the majority of calls for service occur during the week, the Township does not dedicate staff coverage on Saturday or Sunday. Weekend coverage is supplemented by volunteer firefighters. In addition, a “call back” structure is in place for career firefighters to respond during non-staffed hours.

## 3. Why does the Board want to change the level of service currently provided?

Pursuant to the Second Class Township Code, it is the responsibility of the Board to ensure fire and EMS services are provided by the means and to the extent the Board determines. This also includes determining the appropriate financial and administrative assistance for these services. Given the continued residential and commercial growth in the Township, the Board is taking the necessary steps to plan responsibly and better coordinate resources to ensure the continued delivery of core public services.

## 4. How does the Township deliver fire and EMS services currently?

The Township has always been fortunate enough to depend on services performed by its volunteer firefighters. However, in 1998, the Township began its career service with the hiring of four paid firefighters, including a Fire Chief, to begin to support and supplement the services that were being provided by the two volunteer departments (Pancake and Oak Spring) that existed at the time. Those VFDs since that time have merged. The Township currently contracts with the VFD for fire protection services and has done so since 2005. Although the VFD is a service provider, and the Township contracts with the VFD for an undefined monetary contribution, it is the Board’s responsibility to ensure fire and EMS services are provided.

## 5. What are the challenges to the volunteer firefighter model?

According to a report published in 2018, the Pennsylvania Senate Resolution 6 Report, there has been a significant decrease in the levels of volunteer firefighters with approximately 300,000 volunteers in the 1970s to just 38,000 in 2018. This is the result of changes in society (time, work, family commitment, etc.) that challenge the volunteer model of fire and EMS. Additionally, the work performed by firefighters in general has grown more complex necessitating additional training and greater attention to technology, incident management structures and risk management to name a few.

**6. What has been the experience in South Strabane?**

South Strabane is no different with having 41 volunteers in 2003 to now only 12 active members. Over the years the Township has evolved into a combination department where it continues to dedicate ever-increasing human and financial resources to supplement the VFD, our service provider, with a monetary contribution making up 40% of the VFD's revenues as of 2018. Additionally, \$178,000 of the 2021 Fire Department budget is dedicated to supporting the VFD and \$937,000 for the career Fire Department resulting in \$1.12 million.

**7. What steps has the Township taken to engage the VFD regarding improving service structure?**

Through 2020-2021, the Township engaged a consultant to facilitate a strategic planning process with the VFD to assess challenges and recommend improvements to service delivery. The purpose of this was to ensure the future success of our combination department for the benefit of our community. A steering committee was formed with Supervisors, management, career firefighters and the VFD. A report was prepared with recommendations on improvements to a number of elements: communications, governance, performance, recruitment and training, financial and capital planning, and accountability, among others. Unfortunately, the VFD membership rejected the results of the strategic planning process it helped to develop.

Over the summer of 2021 the Board met with the Board of Directors of the VFD to begin discussions on an updated agreement that will better position the Township to enhance fire and EMS services. The updated agreement seeks to ensure continuity of our combination department that is comprised of a professionally trained force supplemented by volunteer firefighters.



**8. Why is it so important for the Township to continue with a combination department?**

As noted before, the Township has a strong history and tradition of volunteerism with fire and EMS services. By strengthening the existing combination department, the Township will be able to enhance services over time that are delivered and managed by a professionally trained force, supplemented with community volunteers, while building upon the existing foundation that has already been laid. The foundation of our department includes two fire stations, trucks and apparatus and equipment used in delivering fire and EMS services now. A stronger combination department will ensure these facilities and equipment are modernized and maintained overtime.

**9. Is the Township preparing to terminate its relationship with the VFD?**

No. The Board has engaged the VFD leadership in discussions regarding improvements to services, such as responding to calls and having a sufficient number of volunteers showing up to calls. The Township appreciates the services rendered by the VFD and will continue to support them as we meet and discuss the best ways to respond to the ongoing growth of our community.

**10. Why do these things matter when providing fire and EMS services?**

Consistency in responding to calls for service with a sufficient force are important for the safety, health and welfare of all our firefighters and Township residents.

**11. Do I continue to call 9-1-1?**

Yes! Residents, businesses and visitors are to always call 9-1-1 in the event of an emergency. Service levels for fire and EMS are being maintained as discussions between the Township and the VFD continue regarding improving our service model.

As the Township's discussions and planning continue with the VFD, residents are encouraged to visit [southstrabane.com](http://southstrabane.com) for updated information.