

DERRY TOWNSHIP BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

Minutes, October 11, 2022 Special Meeting

5:00 p.m.

The special meeting of the Derry Township Board of Supervisors was called to order in the Derry Township Volunteer Fire Department Building at 210 School Street, Bradenville, PA at 5:00 p.m. and the Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Motion was made by James Prohaska and seconded by Donald Kepple to adjourn the previous meeting.

Voting: Donald Kepple-yes, James Prohaska-yes, and David Slifka-yes

Members present were: David Slifka, James Prohaska, Donald Kepple-Supervisors; Samuel Dalfonso, Solicitor; Terry Giannini, Code Enforcement Officer & Donna Wano, Secretary/Treasurer

Presentation was made by David Slifka to discuss a new Public Fire Tax (see attached). This discussion has been going on for at least 3 years, especially after the Eastern Derry Township VFD folded.

The meeting was opened to the public for comments (limited to 2 questions per person):

Al Magnone asked if this is going to be a flat tax or tax based on each person's property. It will be the same as the school and township tax now and will be 1 mill based on property assessment and will fluctuate from person to person. Asked if Derry Borough and New Alexandria Borough residents have to pay this tax? No – Derry Township residents only (these residents are in the school district but not the township). We have mutual aid agreements with fire departments surrounding the township. He said he is closer to Blairsville VFD but asking if he still has to pay the township tax. Yes, because Bradenville is his primary fire department.

Kevin Rhea wants to know why his tax dollars can't go to go to the fire departments closer to his residence since this is for public safety. Derry Township Supervisors do donate to these other fire departments and part of this money can be used to increase these donation amounts, but the majority of the dollars will go to Derry Township. We all need to work together – example if Blairsville asked their residents to pay a fire tax, Derry Township residents would not have to pay. Tax can't be balanced per person by closest fire department – it is based on the township as a whole.

Paul Barsoum asked if other fire departments donate to DTVFD? No, they do not. We donate because we want to be good neighbor with surrounding fire departments. The township is so big and we only have one fire department – maybe in the future we could have another substation. Asked about the maximum for 3 mill cap, but will only be 1 mill at this time. 7 out of 18 townships in Westmoreland County have fire tax and we are the largest township in the county. Asked about a referendum on the election ballot to get a feel for the public as a whole about this tax.

Lanny Beck asked why it couldn't be taxed on a per capita (head tax) to include renters so everybody that lives in the township would be required to pay instead of based on land especially if you own a lot of property – to even out the payments. Worried about senior citizens. Thinks there are more accidents than house fires. It would be up to the landlord to add onto the rent. Asked if we would consider other ways of collecting this tax.

Robert Rosatti from Salem Township stated they have had the fire tax since 2002 – 2 fire companies split the money. In response to the question about a referendum, their township contacted the county election folks about this, but they were told that they couldn't because it was a decision that the Township officials could make unless it was just on informational basis or increasing above 3 mill.

Paul Barsoum asked about the fire hydrant tax and what it was used for. Used to maintain fire hydrants in the township. Agreed about basing tax on head count and everybody pays the same.

Terry Mekić said that this tax is just a start. Next thing will be a paid fire department, pave the parking lot and things will just keep snowballing. The money to be allocated needs to come to the township and they would decide what money is used for. Brought up the new expensive building and needs to be maintained, so tax will keep going up. Fire Department needs money to operate. He thinks Blairsville is not called but they are. The supervisors get the readouts and sign off on them and send to 911.

Zack Dixon lives in Derry Township and is Chief of Blairsville VFD and supports the fire tax. Blairsville is on certain alarms first in the township – it depends on what the call is for. If it's a house fire, Blairsville would be called out first. Believes in supporting all fire companies.

Joe Dixon member of Blairsville VFD for 40 years. In favor of tax, but give this tax to the department that serves his community. Discussed about other substations in the township and brought up Eastern Derry Township folding because people need to be made accountable. Feels there is problem with so-called boundaries in the township. Money should be divided evenly and he wants to know what the money is being spent on. Believes if residents are taxed, they won't give donations to the company that actually serves them. Upset when we say Bradenville is the only VFD in Derry Township because they are not the first responders for majority of calls. He believes there is redundancy with some calls and thinks it's crazy if Bradenville shows up out towards Blairsville as first responder, it looks good on their grant applications but then Blairsville can't use it even though they were there first. Not opposed to tax as long as it's divided and serves the people.

Question was asked if Public Safety Tax and if any monies were going to the state police? It is just a Fire Tax right now, so no this would not go to the state police.

Al Magnone commented about street light, fire hydrant being a flat tax. Why can't this proposed tax be like that? Sam responded. Law is not written that way for this specific tax. We understand what you are saying, but He thinks people might accept a flat tax over a one mill tax on the value of their property.

Steve Fry asked if the tax goes through, what is the project tax revenue? \$123,263. Asked how much money the Fire Department needs to sustain. Mark Piantine responded with over \$110,000 expenses for the year and income was \$95,000. Asked about getting grant from the state - grants are not guaranteed and Relief Association is totally different than a grant. These dollars can only be used for certain equipment, certifications and insurances. He believes this tax will take away from donations to the other fire companies. Thinks this will be a disservice to the residents of the township because we are a lower income community. There has not been a tax raise in Derry Township since 2003. The township managed our money and we've been fortunate to have the Act 13 money so we didn't have to raise taxes over the years. Dave asked when the school district was going to raise taxes again. School district raised their taxes in the past – is there ever a good time? The township very carefully looked at this, because we have to

look at the general operation of the township also. Bradenville does not receive money from any other surrounding areas that they respond to.

Dave Nicol has seen people lose their property because they can't afford the taxes. Need to be fair – why not find a way that he's seen other communities/states do to make an individual tax for every resident (renters and property owners) and you would get a lot more money and it's not dumped on just the property owners.

Duane Campbell asked what happened to all the equipment from Eastern Derry Township Fire Department. The township had to pay \$15,000 for storage and what was left was sold for approximately \$18,000 and that money had to go back to the VFR. Do supervisors still pay for truck insurance. No, the township pays for the workers compensation.

Kim Houser, counsel for DTVFD and assistant chief in Greensburg. Fire Departments are having trouble getting members to manage trucks. Equipment costs so much, so selling hoagies as fundraisers would take forever, plus the extra time to do fundraisers on top of going to fires amounts to a tremendous amount of time. When he represented Salem Township, he couldn't find a law that allowed a flat tax. He believes every tax referendum will get voted down. If you don't provide the OSHA equipment you will lose the volunteers and end up with paid firefighters. He doesn't think you can wait on adopting this tax.

Joe Dixon asked when this decision would be wrapped up. We would have to advertise with an Ordinance and a Resolution, but we wanted to have this information meeting to get the public's input.

Sam responded that the state gives us powers and are very specific on taxes and fees and it's a complicated way of how we can charge things. What he is hearing is that you would like some of this money be distributed to these other fire companies that are responding to this first call and you want to see this charged to everyone equally. Unfortunately, that is not how the state is set up for local governments. The supervisors will definitely take what you are saying into consideration and it may not even be 1 mill this is what they are proposing at this time.

Sam also thanked everyone for keeping their cool. We hope you said what you needed to say and that you got the supervisors to understand your concerns.

Robert Rosatti said Salem Township offered monies to a smaller company and they gave the monies back and said support Salem Township. We work together. The monies are for the Township. It is about protecting the people, not about buying new fire trucks. It's beyond crisis with having enough volunteers. This service is provided absolutely free – they just need the tools to do it. The residents need to ask themselves can they afford this tax or a paid fire department.

Nancy Findish from school board thinks this proposal should be transparent so it is needs to be more known. Protect our seniors and agrees with trying to do a per capita if possible and be fair.

Motion was made by Donald Kepple and seconded by James Prohaska to recess until Tuesday, November 1, 2022 at 5 p.m.

Voting: Donald Kepple-yes, James Prohaska-yes, and David Slifka -yes