

Stockton and Sergeantsville Fire Companies' Joint Meeting 1/11/24

Minutes prepared by Bill Brown:

Notes of Meeting for Stockton Borough

Stockton Borough Council members in attendance:

Michael Mann
Ken Kozuhowski
Peter Folz
Bill Brown

No action was taken at this informational presentation by the Volunteer Fire Companies.

Sergeantsville Fire Chief Greg Bunting and Stockton Fire Chief Rick Hendricks opened the meeting by introducing Chris Schultz, a consultant with long experience as a volunteer firefighter and in municipal government. He presented information about major changes in the provision of volunteer firefighting services nationally and regionally, including:

- An aging volunteer force,
- Significant drops in new volunteers and retention,
- Changes where people work and live, leaving far fewer firefighters available to respond locally to calls during work hours,
- Substantially increased call volumes, many for non-fire related issues,
- Major training requirements,
- Increased acquisition and maintenance costs of more sophisticated equipment.

More detailed information is presented in the attached brochure which Mr. Schulz referred to and then distributed after the meeting:

<https://www.nvfc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/NVFC-Volunteer-Fire-Service-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

An additional fact sheet can be found here:

<https://www.nvfc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2023-Fire-Service-Infographic.pdf>

Mr. Schultz explained the major models for providing fire service in New Jersey, including:

- A paid Fire Department, funded by municipal taxes,
- Local or regional fire districts with independent taxing authority,
- Volunteer, independently organized non-profit companies.

Stockton (501(c)(4) and Delaware (501(c)(3) are non-profit independent fire companies. Delaware has about 1950 residences and Stockton about 225.

Mr. Schultz presented data showing the tax liability savings to each town associated with a merged volunteer force:

Delaware Township - \$2.3 mil. or \$2,200 per residence
Stockton Borough - \$1.2 mil. or \$4,800 per residence.

Mr. Schultz identified a number of economies of scale and savings associated with a merger, including savings associated with not maintaining duplicative apparatus and properties, while better ensuring better staffing on calls. He noted, for example, that four (4) trained firefighters need to be present before any can enter a building.

Mr. Schultz also noted that some Volunteer Fire Services and Fire Districts face a challenging environment in New Jersey, and companies are beginning to merge (Hamilton and Chesterfield fire districts), possibly closing (Maple Shade) or being replaced by paid companies (Lambertville).

Rich Warshinsky (Rosemont) commented on the numerous municipalities in New Jersey. Mr. Schulz commented that while there was a push by the State at some point there have been very few municipal mergers and the State has left it to the towns.

Eileen Foley (Stockton) asked when the firehouse will be closed. Chief Bunting and Chief Hendricks explained that no decision has yet been made as to when that might happen or when the merger might “go live.” The companies are working through these decisions in a careful committee and community based process, including having a substation. Both noted the aging of their volunteer forces and the absence of young recruits, who, as they get older, may have to move away because they cannot afford to live in their hometown. Stockton runs about 200 calls a year and its youngest firefighter is 47.

In response to Ms. Foley’s question about social media recruitment, it was observed that it has not been productive.

Ken Kozuhowski (Stockton) asked would this be a “band aid” or a longer term solution. In response the Chiefs noted the many benefits including more fluid reactions and uniform SOPs. They indicated if this works out it could be a stronger model, with reduced vehicle maintenance costs. Delaware has 250 calls a year and that number may not justify a paid department.

Mike Odenwald (Stockton) commented on mutual aid and efficiencies. The Chiefs noted that some vehicles are redundant. In response to his question about who is opposed, the Chiefs noted they have not seen any, but these issues will be fleshed out in the merger discussions going forward. It was noted that if you live in Stockton, you are currently 0.5 miles from a firehouse and Sergeantsville is 3 miles away, but that difference may not mean a faster response due to a lack of firefighters or not enough firefighters available to take on the needed response. They noted Lambertville has 300 calls a year, with four (4) officers on duty from 8:00 am to midnight and 2 on duty from 12:00 to 8:00 am, but four (4) firefighters are needed before entering a building. They indicated they are looking at options to provide good coverage in response to a query about keeping a truck in Stockton.

Mike Mann (Stockton) asked what the companies need from Stockton, and the Chiefs indicated they will ask as the process unfolds.

Mike Odenwald (Stockton) asked how much money the companies raise each year. Chief Hendricks indicated Stockton raised about \$118,000, through a variety of programs, (but have not been able to replace some equipment), with about half in municipal support. Mr. Schultz noted municipalities do have responsibilities associated with fire companies. Sergeantsville raises about \$150,000 to \$160,000 a year and relies on fund drives, breakfasts and municipal support.

The Chiefs indicated that a “go live” date will be discussed at an upcoming meeting on Jan. 31, 2024.