



Pennsylvania Municipal League

President – J. William Reynolds, Mayor, City of Bethlehem



Pennsylvania State Association of Township Commissioners

President – Todd Miller, Commissioner, Crescent Township

**Testimony Before the Senate Veterans Affairs and  
Emergency Preparedness Committee**

**Municipal Planning to Purchase Fire Apparatus**

**Pennsylvania Municipal League  
Pennsylvania State Association of Township Commissioners**

**Presented By: Kaitlin Errickson, Governmental Affairs Manager**

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Chair Mastriano, Chair Muth, and members of the Committee, on behalf of the Pennsylvania Municipal League (The League) and the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Commissioners (PSATC), thank you for the invitation to provide testimony regarding municipal planning to purchase fire apparatus. I am Kaitlin Errickson, Governmental Affairs Manager for The League. Together, the municipal membership of The League and PSATC represent over 200 full-service, core communities serving over five million Pennsylvanians.

While we are all aware of the recent fire apparatus production issues, including extraordinary cost increases and lead times, it is important to examine how municipalities plan for these long-term investments and the challenges faced. Each community has their own specific needs and standards for the fire apparatus that serves their municipality, and each local governing board and municipal manager knows their financial realities and budgetary constraints. While each community's needs and funding processes for fire apparatus are unique, all strive to provide top tier fire services and quick response times whether the fire department is volunteer or career.

To collect information regarding best practices and challenges municipalities face, we spoke to several of our members encompassing cities, boroughs, and townships representing volunteer and career fire departments. While we found our members responsibly plan for and fund fire apparatus purchases, we also discovered municipalities struggle with shortened replacement schedules to manage lengthy lead times, while also confronting the need to pay more to maintain fire service levels.

Ideally, municipalities should have a schedule for replacing fire apparatus as a capital expense. It is vital to plan ahead and be prepared to replace fire apparatus at the end of its lifespan. Some fire departments respond to more calls than others, meaning their fire apparatus may need to retire sooner than the expected 20 to 25 year life span. For example, the City of Williamsport receives a high volume of calls and expects their fire engines to last about 8 years while their towers are expected to last just 12 years. The City has a planned schedule to replace the apparatus before it is set to retire or go into reserve status. Each of the communities we spoke to has implemented a schedule in collaboration with their fire department, and each of them have about 8 to 12 frontline apparatus at a given time. To maintain this sized fleet, there is continual turnover and purchases of replacement vehicles.

Replacement schedules have been impacted by significant production time. With production taking four to five years, it is getting harder to predict the needs of a community five years out. Fire apparatus must now be ordered well in advance to take the drastically long lead time into account. Municipalities have to make tough decisions about continued maintenance of a truck, which is costly, or extending a truck's lifetime beyond normal protocol to sustain service levels. A Township we spoke to has actually hired its own fleet mechanic, as that was a cheaper option for maintenance, though this may not be feasible for all municipalities. Additionally, unforeseen maintenance issues have compelled municipalities to purchase used apparatus to fill in gaps. Hampden Township chose to purchase a used ladder truck from the 1970s to serve as a backup since their modern day ladder truck is unexpectedly malfunctioning and needs

consistent maintenance. Purchasing used fire apparatus comes with its own challenges, as they may not be outfitted with the equipment a municipality needs, the used apparatus itself may have issues, and firefighters must be trained to operate different truck models. Despite the issues caused by fire apparatus production, municipalities continue to responsibly plan to keep fire services operational.

Municipalities must also carefully plan to fund or finance these purchases. Municipalities budget annually, with most funds coming from the property tax, to provide funding to their respective fire departments, including funding for fire apparatus. Some communities levy the special purpose fire tax to ensure there is dedicated funding. For example, the Borough of Chambersburg implements the maximum fire tax at 3 mills, 2.5 of which is used to fund fire apparatus. Even when municipalities are budgeting annually for the fire department's needs, the doubling or tripling of costs and earlier ordering schedules have impacted the ability to cover future purchases. Municipalities now have to allocate more to fire apparatus purchases to maintain their normal level of service.

While some communities are fortunate to have enough funds to cover these costs, others have turned to financing options. Using their replacement schedules, Williamsport and Hampden have historically saved enough funds to purchase fire apparatus outright, however, they now plan to explore financing options for future purchases. Unsurprisingly, municipal revenues cannot meet the rising costs of fire apparatus, nor do they meet the rising costs of public safety in general.

It is also important to have regular communication and a relationship between a municipality and its fire department. It is a municipality's duty to ensure the public safety of their constituency, and clearly fire services play a critical role. Working in tandem will ensure the needs of the fire department are met.

That being said, no amount of planning for future costs will solve the issue of stagnant, inflexible municipal revenue options. Local government currently operates in a municipal tax system established in 1965. Much has changed in the landscape of local government since then – population shifts, aging housing stock in older core communities, increased cost of municipal services, increases in tax-exempt properties receiving services, etc. – the only thing that hasn't changed are municipal revenue options. Simply put, the current local taxation structure developed in 1965 does not meet today's municipal revenue needs or modern realities.

One potential option we have championed, and it's been introduced as House Bill 2488, is an increase of the Local Services Tax (LST) cap from \$52 to \$156. The LST can only be used to fund essential services like public safety and road construction and maintenance.

Ultimately, we must provide municipalities with more revenue options to help meet their communities' needs and expectations. Rising costs and archaic municipal revenue options have tied the hands of local governments. If the Commonwealth does not act to provide new revenue sources to municipalities, the struggle to fund public safety services will only get worse.

In closing, I would like to thank Chair Mastriano and the Committee for holding this hearing. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.