

“ THE CHALLENGES OF FIREFIGHTING TODAY”

TESTIMONY FROM BOB GORDON, -- PRESIDENT OF ACCOG

PROVIDED FOR THE VETERANS AFFAIRS AND EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS COMMITTEE AND THE
MAJORITY POLICY COMMITTEE OF THE SENATE OF PENNSYLVANIA October 25, 2013

Good Morning Senator Baker, Senator Solobay, Senator Erickson and committee members;

Thank you for coming to Adams County to hear testimony regarding the “Challenges Facing Volunteer Fire/EMS Providers” here in Adams County as well as across this Commonwealth.

My name is Bob Gordon and I am President of the Adams County Council of Governments. I know that my testimony needs to be brief because you will hear from numerous people today who are very knowledgeable about this subject and I want to make sure they get all the time they need to share their thoughts and ideas with you all. This written testimony is for your consideration and background and I hope you have an opportunity to review so that you are aware of my background and why I am here sitting before you today. I believe this is a” crisis situation” that we all need to deal with together. Adams County Municipalities want to partner with our State Legislators to work on and find solutions for many of the issues you will hear about today. If we are not able to deal with all these issues the consequences will be very expensive for State Government , Local Governments and the end result will be the costs to our citizens with the continued loss of our dedicated volunteers.

I am a native of Adams County, joined my local fire department at age 16 when our world was so different from today.

After College, I served two years in the U. S. Army during the Korean War. After that over 40 years in my Banking career helping people , working in York County, Chester County, South Florida and Carroll County Maryland before I retired 16 year ago. During my Banking Career, I was involved in numerous community organizations but the one that turned my life around and put me on a path of community service was the York Jaycees. I served in the Jaycees in York and in our state organization and national organization and I am a Life Member, JCI Senator # 4417.

Rep Stan Saylor is a fellow JCI Senator. Ask him about this designation and my low number. So today, I am still trying to make a difference for the benefit of my community, my friends, neighbors and fellow citizens. After retiring from Banking , I got involved in local Township government 10 years ago, serving on our planning commission, elected Auditor and for the past 7 years as a Township Supervisor.

I am sure you know the purpose of a Council of Governments . They provide an opportunity for local governments to join together and work for the betterment of our communities. Our COG was formed 4 years ago, and I am a founding member. We have 26 of our local 34 municipalities as members, plus the County of Adams and our 6 School Districts. We are a member of the Pa. COG.

We have a number of active committees and today you already heard from Mr. Senft, the consultant who conducted our County Wide Fire Funding Study that we released 6 months ago through our Emergency Services Committee. We have provided you all with copies of this study, which recommends adoption of a .25 mil dedicated property tax by each municipality to fund Volunteer Fire/Ems services in Adams County. It has been a priority of the Adams County COG to pursue this study and its recommendations. We have other committees, such as Joint Purchasing, Public Works, County Collaboration and Legislative. We are here today, because today's subject was one of our Legislative priorities for this year and we commend Senator Alloway for acting on this and bringing you all here to Adams County. We also listed priorities dealing with Prevailing Wage Reform, Unfunded Mandates, Economic Development and Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT)

I am here today to represent "Local Government", and you should know that I am a proponent of Local Government, Government nearest the people. You will hear from many others who represent the Fire and Emergency Services Departments. One success we have already realized from our County Wide Study has been the cooperation and collaboration that has begun between the departments and local governments. We have much more work to accomplish, but we believe that we have started down the correct path for our future work together. The purpose of our study was to inform local governments, give them tools to work with to assist their volunteers, and to find equitable funding for our volunteer departments.

Since I serve as a Township Supervisor, I am going to reference Township regulations ,however I understand that the Borough Code is very similar to the 2nd Class Township Code.

At this point , I also feel its proper for a disclaimer. I am certain that I am not familiar with all statutes and regulations currently on the books , and pending , regarding this subject.

By Statue, "we are responsible for ensuring that Fire and Emergency Medical Services are provided within the Township by the means and to the extent determined by the Township, including the appropriate financial and administrative assistance for these services."

By statute, by "Resolution we may levy taxes upon real property up to a maximum of 3 mills to purchase and maintain fire apparatus and a suitable place to house fire apparatus, to make appropriations for the

training of fire company personnel and for fire training schools or centers and to contract with adjacent municipal corporations or volunteer fire companies therein for fire protection. "The township may appropriate up to one-half, but not to exceed one mill, of the revenue generated from a tax under this clause for the purpose of paying salaries, benefits or other compensation of fire suppression employees of the township or a Fire company serving the township."

By statute," an annual tax not exceeding one half mill to support ambulance, rescue and other emergency services serving the township. Up to one half of the revenue generated from a tax under this clause for the purpose of paying salaries, benefits or other compensation of employees of the ambulance rescue or other emergency service"

" To exceed any of these millages, it must be submitted to the Voters of the Township."

I think it is time that you all analyze these statutes for possible changes and improvements to meet the needs of local governments today.

Through our own experience, we are facing significant challenges in our goal to have all Adams County municipalities adopt a dedicated emergency services tax. We recognize that a piecemeal approach in which some municipalities participate and others do not creates an unfair situation for county landowners and undermines the intent of equitable funding for all of our fire departments.

At this stage in the process, several municipalities are expected to adopt a dedicated emergency services tax, but we are a long way from our goal. Meanwhile, volunteer fire departments must spend an inordinate amount of time and energy on fund raising activities, which is often cited as an important reason for the difficulty in attracting and retaining volunteers.

We are hearing from some of our members that they do not like the Fire Tax because its not fair and it should be some type of flat tax and not a tax assessed on real estate values. (Improved and Un-Improved) More like a per capita tax. We could have a long discussion about taxes but time will not permit that discussion at this time, but I think we need a brief discussion on the subject of taxes.

No one likes to talk about taxes or a tax increase with our citizens. Webster defines Tax as a "charge" imposed by Governmental Authorities. You all currently have discussions going on about school taxes, transportation infrastructure as well as other subjects. I am suggesting that we need to look at our entire tax structure in this Commonwealth. How do we keep things as simple as possible, give local governments as many options as possible to raise necessary funds to operate ,and meet our obligations to provide for the Health, Safety and Welfare of our residents. Every community is different and one size does not fit all, so we need different options at our disposal. The one School Tax bill before you currently approaches this methodology. I think it is an idea whose time has come.

We need to think outside the box. Perhaps we need some basic taxes based on real estate assessed values, Earned Income and Per Capita for a period of time until we can transition to other methods, but it is time, in my humble opinion, to think about a new approach to our income. We need to think about "User Fees and "Service Fees", and "Consumption Fees" We have one example currently in our "Sales and Use Tax", Use being the key word. Every citizen uses services and products of some kind and should be assessed a fee for the use of those services and products. Perhaps a flat "Local Services Fee" could be considered to assist local governments in providing our mandated services. The fee should be assessed against all individuals and business operations as well as tax exempt organizations who require the services that are being provided. The transportation bills that you are currently considering are another good example of this theory. We all use our roads, bridges, airports, mass transit, etc. We should pay a reasonable fee for the use of all these conveniences," because they need to be maintained." I work part time at a local gas station. All my customers need the product I sell to function in their daily lives. So, I charge a profit margin but I also charge a user fee (Gas Tax) for you to have the privilege to drive your vehicle upon our roads and bridges as you go about your daily life. Something to think about?

After we discuss the subject of income options, then we need to look at some of the following issues. Many of which others will speak about I am sure;

1. We need to fix the current problems related to workers comp insurance created by Act 46 My insurance carrier dropped our Township and I am currently searching for a new company to insure our Fire Company. Many others have experienced this problem.
2. Consider exempting Fire Company's from the Small Games of Chance regulations.
3. Streamline some of the training requirements. Permit certified individuals from other states to be recognized here in Pa. without having to re-take the training here. Problems with accessible training in a timely manner and training costs.
4. Permit Fire Company's to charge fees for false alarms
5. Permit Fire Company's to charge fees for other services provided, eg; pumping water from basements, accidents, etc.
6. Find ways to increase Fire Relief Association funding to provide for opportunities for incentives to improve retention of volunteers

In closing, If we continue our current systems of having local governments be responsible for these services, we must find more options to fund these Volunteer Organizations who are providing these mandated services and find ways to incentivize volunteers and rewards to retain our volunteers.

Thank you again for coming to Adams County and for the opportunity to speak with you all today and Thank You for all the work you do for the Citizens of our Commonwealth.

Respectfully submitted,

Bob Gordon, President, ACCOG and Chair of Hamiltonban Township

