



Commissioner Scott Dunn, Fayette County

Senate Veterans Affairs & Emergency Preparedness Committee Hearing

Countywide Public Safety Authorities

October 12, 2021

Good afternoon and thank you for coming to beautiful Fayette County. I hope this is not your last trip here. Please return, as a tourist, to enjoy all our outdoor amenities and historical sites.

My name is Scott Dunn. I am a Fayette County Commissioner and member of the CCAP Taskforce for EMS in Crisis. It took about 10 days into my first term as Commissioner in 2019 to ask to be added to this Taskforce. I am passionate about public safety, our local EMS, and Fire Departments.

I'll first discuss EMS. Fayette County is serviced by 5 EMS companies, the largest being Fayette EMS which serves about 105,000 of Fayette's 129,000 residents. THIS PAST WEEK, one EMS provider closed in two municipalities. Fayette EMS stepped in as the new provider almost immediately. The last three Facebook posts by Fayette EMS are to welcome portions of Nicholson Township and the borough of Fairchance to the Fayette EMS family. Their third post down the page was letting people know that they are hiring, as they have trouble keeping people.

This has been the norm in the recent history of EMS providers in Fayette County.

In 2017, Marclay Ambulance Service closed after filing for bankruptcy.

In 2018 and 2020, Fayette EMS nearly closed its facility in Wharton Township. These closures were averted by a private donation and \$30k in taxpayer money from Fayette County.

In 2019, Fayette EMS reported they were still in financial crisis, attributing some of that crisis to \$430k in bad debt.

Quoting Fayette EMS Chief Rick Adobato "we are the poorest county in Pennsylvania. Most people don't have the money, and that's sad. We have to find a way to keep the doors open."

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Fayette County awarded a \$248k to Fayette EMS to help keep their doors open. A smaller grant was provided Brownsville Ambulance Service.

I could go on but in consideration of your time, I will assume you get the gist. We have an EMS crisis in Fayette County. And in a statewide sense, we are not unique.

Remembering that the Senate Resolution 6 Commission in 2018 stated that Fire and EMS “are in crisis” with EMS “woefully lacking in funding.” Ladies and gentlemen, it’s 2021. And we need to do better for the safety of our citizens. There has been no change since then.

We also need to look out for the safety of our visitors. Fayette County is home to the second largest state park, Ohiopyle. In 2020, 1.7 million visitors came to see and experience all this wonderful park has to offer. From biking, hiking, walking, rock-climbing, white-water rafting, fishing, hunting and all other manner of outdoor activities, you can do it at Ohiopyle and the surrounding State game lands. Ohiopyle State Park surrounds the tiny Borough of Ohiopyle, population about 65, and consumes a large (untaxed) portion of Stewart Township with a population of 730. With a limited tax base, less than 800 residents support the Fire and Rescue in the Ohiopyle State Park.

The Fayette EMS Wharton Station, already partially funded with local taxpayer dollars, provides EMS services to Ohiopyle. They see a 144% increase in emergency calls in the summer tourist season.

The Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau, seeing the need to properly outfit local fire and rescue has donated off-road rescue vehicles to Ohiopyle, Dunbar, New Haven and Perry Township fire departments as they monitor miles of bicycle and hiking trails.

We are trying to do our part, but more needs done in the way of helping EMS.

Our local volunteer fire departments are in a similar predicament. And I apologize by mentioning my local Fire Station 12 in Dunbar Borough. From 2011 until 2019, I was a Councilman in Dunbar Borough, the last six years serving as Council President. My local VFD in my hometown of 1,000 is my frame of reference.

The respect I have for my local firefighters is unmatched. Their dedication and commitment to their community is unwavering and I know when something is needed that I can rely on Station 12.

While supported by a State Fire Marshall grant of about \$11k, which is greatly welcomed, please understand that the Borough department has a yearly budget of nearly \$150k. That's a lot of hoagies to sell. The difference is made up in non-stop fundraising by selling hoagies, collecting in boots, selling tickets and cash bashes. You can buy a fire department hoagie in Fayette County on almost any and every Saturday morning.

The largest items in the Dunbar budget include required maintenance to vehicles, testing of equipment to maintain ISO ratings, training, personal equipment, insurance, electric and other utilities. Dunbar runs their department "by the book", not cutting corners, making sure to have to equipment in top-notch working order.

So you say, just raise taxes in your Borough. While the Borough has boundaries, the fire department does not. The Dunbar VFD serves a large portion of Dunbar Township, portions of North Union Township and 12 miles of the Sheepskin and Great Allegheny Passage bike trails. A vast majority of the calls are traffic accidents on Route 119 in Dunbar Township. And through Fayette County Emergency Management, they

have been dispatched farther as needs arise. During one large fire in neighboring City of Uniontown, while all of that city's units were on the fire scene, it was my small borough department staged in a Uniontown Station in case another emergency would happen.

I talked with Fayette County EMA Director Roy Shipley, himself a long-standing volunteer fireman, about his station in rural Mill Run. They are trying to attract younger members but to need for constant fund-raising and that demand on a person's time is a deterrent.

I've tried to show the need in Fayette County. And I do not believe Fayette is unique in its needs. But if allowed, we could be unique in finding local solutions. So now I want to turn to this proposed Senate Bill 698.

PA County Code allows three ways for Counties to collect revenue:

1. Property taxes
2. Per Capita Taxes
3. Reasonable Fees for Services

EMS, Fire and Rescue are not functions of or services provided by the County. Therefore, I, as a County Commissioner, cannot charge a reasonable fee for a service I do not provide.

Fayette County has already earmarked its Act 13 funds to pay for new microwave towers and communications equipment to a total of \$5.6 million dollars. We are doing all we can for public safety with limited funding available to us.

Remember that \$30k in funding to keep an EMS station open? Those were tax-payer funds done with no oversight. I do not have a mechanism to locally fund fire, EMS and rescue in Fayette County.

I am of the opinion that a magic bill from Harrisburg cannot solve this problem. There are too many ways EMS companies can be structured and paid that one bill will never cover each. The funding gap for our fire departments is too great to let stand. And the constant need for fund raising a deterrent to attracting new fire fighters.

This is why having local control, with local knowledge, over local problems, is the best path forward. Each county is different and will have differing ways to raise the needed funding under a County Public Safety Authority. As some counties will say they don't need one. Nothing is this bill makes it a requirement on a county, township, borough, or city level to be included in the Authority. And if it is determined that there is this requirement, that was not the intent of the CCAP Taskforce.

Senate Bill 698 may not be the perfect bill for each County and their situation. But it's a step in the right direction. If this bill is not to be enacted, my hope is that this is the start of conversations between the State Government, CCAP, and the State associations for townships, boroughs, and cities. Whether you want to believe it or not, public safety is in all of our domains.

Thank you. I am available for any questions.