

Welcome to tonight's informational session on the Regional Fire Services Study. Before we begin the presentation, we want to clearly establish a few ground rules to ensure everyone has a productive evening and a chance to participate.

Purpose: This meeting is strictly an informational session.

No Decisions: No votes or final decisions will happen tonight.

Microphone: Please use the designated microphone for all questions.

Time Limit: Individual questions must not exceed three minutes.

Respect: Keep all comments professional and respectful of others.

Hard Stop: The question-and-answer period will end strictly at 9:00 PM.

If you have any questions that were not answered this evening, please reach out to your applicable municipality.

Thank you for your cooperation and for being part of this important discussion.



Regional Fire Services Study

Ambler Borough · North Wales Borough · Upper Gwynedd Township ·
Lower Gwynedd Township

Findings, Analysis & Recommendations for Fire Service Regionalization

Conducted by Retired Fire Chief Derrick Sawyer, EFO | PA Governor's Center for Local Government Services



Presentation Agenda

01

Study Overview & Objectives

Purpose, scope, and methodology of the regionalization study

03

Current Fire Service Status

Each department's staffing, apparatus, call volume, and finances

05

Benefits of Regionalization

Efficiency, cost savings, service improvements, and career development

07

Implementation Roadmap

Phased plan: 4 phases over 24–30 months

02

Community Profiles

Snapshot of all four municipalities: population, area, risks

04

Gap Analysis

Response times, staffing, apparatus, training, and governance gaps

06

Challenges & Risks

Cultural, governance, financial, and logistical considerations

08

Key Recommendations

Nine strategic recommendations for moving forward

Study Overview & Objectives

PURPOSE

This study evaluates opportunities to enhance fire and emergency services through collaborative planning, shared resources, and potential organizational integration across the four municipalities.

Conducted by:

Retired Fire Chief Derrick Sawyer, EFO
Fire Services Peer Consultant, PA DCED

Authorized by:

PA Governor's Center for Local Government Services

Focus areas:

Operations · Staffing · Finance · Governance · Risk

STUDY OBJECTIVES

Improve Public Safety

Enhance response capabilities; reduce times to meet NFPA 1720

Operational Efficiency

Eliminate redundancies; optimize apparatus, personnel, facilities

Fiscal Responsibility

Identify cost-saving opportunities; assess capital implications

Governance & Management

Explore structures; clarify accountability and oversight

Community Engagement

Ensure transparency; build community trust in regional model

Community Profiles

Upper Gwynedd Twp

Population

17,100

Area

8.1 sq mi

Density

2,000/sq mi

ISO Rating

Class 3

Annual Calls

655 (2024)

KEY RISK

Industrial/Commercial
(Merck Campus)

Lower Gwynedd Twp

Population

12,100

Area

9.3 sq mi

Density

1,301/sq mi

ISO Rating

Class 4

Annual Calls

~272 (WEC 2023)

KEY RISK

Suburban/Senior Living
Retirement Communities

Ambler Borough

Population

6,800

Area

1.5 sq mi

Density

7,647/sq mi

ISO Rating

Class 4

Annual Calls

~600 (est.)

KEY RISK

Dense Urban
Historic Downtown

North Wales Borough

Population

3,400

Area

0.6 sq mi

Density

5,500/sq mi

ISO Rating

Class 5

Annual Calls

653 (2023)

KEY RISK

Compact Residential
Older Housing Stock

Current Fire Service: Department Profiles

Wissahickon Fire Co. (Station 7)

SERVES

Ambler Borough + Lower Gwynedd (south)

MEMBERS

65+ active volunteers

ANNUAL CALLS

597 calls (2023)

ISO RATING

Class 4

KEY APPARATUS

Ladder 7 (100-ft Pierce), Engine 7, Heavy Rescue 7, Squad 7B, plus support

FUNDING

STRENGTH: Largest volunteer force; technical rescue specialist; dual-station coverage

North Penn VFC (Station 62)

SERVES

North Wales Borough + Lower Gwynedd (north/west)

MEMBERS

~55 active volunteers

ANNUAL CALLS

653 calls (2023, incl. QRS EMS)

ISO RATING

Class 5

KEY APPARATUS

Ladder 62, 2 Engines, Rescue Squad, QRS vehicle, Traffic Unit

FUNDING

STRENGTH: Regional ladder company; QRS EMS capability; improving response times

Upper Gwynedd FD (Station 80)

SERVES

Upper Gwynedd Township

MEMBERS

50–60 active volunteers

ANNUAL CALLS

655 calls (2024); 471 fire + 184 QRS

ISO RATING

Class 3

KEY APPARATUS

Quint 80 (2021), Squad 80 (2021), Engine 80 (2008), QRS 80, multiple command vehicles

FUNDING

STRENGTH: Best-funded; newest apparatus; strong municipal integration; industrial expertise

Gap Analysis: Where the System Falls Short

Response Times

BENCHMARK

NFPA 1720: 90% of calls ≤9 min

CURRENT STATE

50–85% compliance across jurisdictions

⚠ *None meet the 90% threshold consistently; volunteer off-peak hours are biggest vulnerability*

Staffing Capacity

BENCHMARK

NFPA 1720: 15 firefighters within 9 min

CURRENT STATE

4–10 personnel typical initial response

⚠ *Aging volunteer base; no unified recruitment strategy; daytime coverage is critically low*

Apparatus & Equipment

BENCHMARK

NFPA 1901/1906: Standardized fleet

CURRENT STATE

Mixed ages; siloed replacement cycles; duplicative units

⚠ *No joint procurement or interoperability planning; capital needs are mounting*

Training Standards

BENCHMARK

NFPA 1001/1021: Consistent certification

CURRENT STATE

Varies by department; occasional joint drills only

⚠ *No regional training plan; certification inconsistency; no cross-department SOGs*

Facilities Coverage

BENCHMARK

4–6 min drive-time coverage

CURRENT STATE

Overlap zones and under-served areas exist

⚠ *No GIS deployment modeling; deferred maintenance; ADA/accessibility gaps*

Governance & Finance

BENCHMARK

Unified governance, shared long-range plan

CURRENT STATE

Fully independent municipal oversight

⚠ *No shared accountability, strategic plan, or equitable cost-sharing model*

Benefits of Regionalization

Faster, More Reliable Response

Closest station responds regardless of municipal boundaries. Unified dispatch and duty crews address daytime staffing gaps. Target 85–90% NFPA 1720 compliance (up from 50–85%).

Cost Savings & Fiscal Efficiency

Shared apparatus purchasing reduces costs by ~\$1–2M over 5 years. Consolidated insurance, admin, and grants. Joint procurement drives down per-unit costs.

Standardized Training & Operations

One set of SOGs, certifications, and protocols for all stations. Enables cross-company interoperability and joint drills. Reduces fireground errors and improves firefighter safety.

Specialized Regional Capabilities

Formalizes Technical Rescue (WFC), Hazmat/Industrial (UGTFD), and EMS/Ladder (NPVFC) as dedicated regional units available to all communities.

Volunteer Recruitment & Retention

Unified LOSAP, stipends, and tuition assistance. Larger organization with more leadership pathways. Shared workload reduces burnout; regional cadet & explorer programs.

Community Risk Reduction

One regional fire marshal, consistent code enforcement across all four jurisdictions. Unified public education reaching all schools and businesses. GIS-driven pre-incident planning.

Challenges & Risks of Consolidation

While regionalization offers clear benefits, these challenges must be addressed proactively:

Cultural Integration

- Each company has deep history, identity & traditions — loss of name, apparatus colors, or local chief can trigger significant resistance
- "Egos are the biggest obstacle" — seniority disputes, loyalty to current chiefs
- Risk of volunteer attrition during transition if not managed with empathy

Governance & Politics

- 4 municipal governments must agree on representation, voting weights, and decision authority
- Elected officials may fear constituent backlash over perceived loss of 'their' fire company
- PA lacks independent fire districts with taxing authority — requires IGA or joint authority structure

Equitable Funding

- Upper Gwynedd currently bears the most cost — others will pay more under a shared formula
- Fundraising may decline if public perceives service as 'fully government-funded'
- Cost formula debates: population vs. call volume vs. assessed value — each favors different municipalities

Logistics & Operations

- Apparatus reassignments, equipment standardization, station identity, SOG rewriting
- Dispatch re-programming at Montgomery County 911 — risk of transition-period gaps
- Asset transfers, debt assumptions, relief association merger — requires legal counsel and state coordination

Phased Implementation Roadmap

1

Planning & Agreement

Months 0–6

- Form Regional Fire Services Task Force
- Draft Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) and governance bylaws
- Financial analysis & cost-sharing formula development
- Municipal governing body votes on IGA; Regional Fire Commission established

2

Formation & Integration

Months 6–18

- Appoint Fire Chief; merge administrative functions
- Draft unified SOGs with volunteer input; begin cross-training
- Inventory and standardize apparatus, equipment, coupling standards
- Merge relief associations; coordinate new dispatch protocols with Montgomery Co. 9-1-1

3

Full Implementation

Months 18–24

- Go live as one regional department with unified dispatch
- Unified branding, signage, and apparatus decals (while preserving station heritage insignia)
- Launch regional volunteer recruitment & LOSAP programs
- Complete legal asset transfers and non-profit consolidation

4

Stabilization & Improvement

Month 24+

- Monitor KPIs: response times, member retention, cost per call
- Evaluate feasibility of formal Regional Fire Authority (5-yr horizon)
- Continuous improvement: expand CRR, training programs, grant applications
- Annual performance reporting to all four municipal governing bodies

5-Year Cost-Benefit Outlook

| Factor | Status Quo (5 yr) | Regionalized (5 yr) | Net Effect | |
|--------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Apparatus Costs | \$3–4M (duplicative) | \$1.5–2M (shared) | ↓ \$1–2M savings | SHORT TERM 1-3 yr |
| Training Costs | \$200K (duplicated) | \$150K (joint) | ↓ \$50K | |
| Personnel (Stipends) | \$0–50K minimal | \$200–400K staffing | ↑ Short-term cost | MED TERM 3-5 yr |
| Admin/Governance | \$50K/municipality | \$150K (shared pool) | Neutral (redistributed) | |
| NFPA 1720 Compliance | 60–70% of calls | 85–90% of calls | ↑ Service reliability | LONG TERM 5+ yr |
| Community Risk Reduction | Inconsistent | Consistent regional CRR | ↑ Public safety | |

Nine Strategic Recommendations

1

Formalize Regional Planning & Governance

Establish a Regional Fire Commission via IGA; ensure all 4 municipalities have equal representation

2

Improve Staffing Sustainability

Unified recruitment, stipends, LOSAP, and live-in programs; regional duty crews for daytime coverage

3

Standardize Operations & Training

One set of SOGs, NFPA-aligned certifications, a regional training officer, and joint annual drills

4

Optimize Apparatus & Facility Planning

Joint fleet assessment; coordinated replacement schedule; eliminate duplication; shared specialty units

5

Expand Community Risk Reduction

Regional fire marshal; unified outreach targeting seniors, schools, and high-density zones in each community

6

Modernize Technology & Communications

Shared CAD/records system; standardized radio equipment; updated dispatch protocols with Montgomery Co. 911

7

Financial & Grant Strategy

Adopt equitable cost-sharing formula (population + assessed value + call volume); pursue regional grants

8

Risk & Sustainability Planning

Address volunteer decline, aging infrastructure, and climate resilience through shared investment strategy

9

Performance Monitoring & KPIs

Track response time compliance, member retention, cost per call, and training hours; report annually to all municipalities

Summary & Path Forward

Foundation Exists:

Strong mutual aid relationships and shared values provide a solid base for regional collaboration

Challenges Are Real:

Volunteer decline, fiscal strain, and coverage gaps are not sustainable under the status quo

Benefits Are Clear:

Improved response, cost savings, standardized training, and stronger recruitment await regionalization

Community Comes First:

Station identities and local representation must be preserved — this is not a takeover, it is a partnership

The path forward begins with a shared commitment — the four municipalities are stronger together than apart.

Questions



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