

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Merger: theory vs. reality

Proponents of consolidating Pottstown's four volunteer companies into one centralized bureau say a merger is necessary to control costs.

However, Pottstown's existing fire service is already considerably less expensive, per resident, than other urban departments in eastern Pennsylvania.

David Woglom, of Lafayette College's Meyner Center, has written a position paper on behalf of the borough that advocates consolidation.

Ironically, the cost of fire service per resident in Easton, home of Lafayette College, is nearly **four times** the cost of fire protection in Pottstown, as shown below.

Woglom's position paper is full of generalities about the enhanced ability of a centralized department to cut costs and attract volunteers. But it is completely devoid of specifics.

For example, each Pottstown volunteer fire company employs three well-trained, paid drivers who work 24-hour shifts, assuring that four drivers are always on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

According to Goodwill Fire Chief Kevin Yerger, who will be chief of the newly merged fire company, the new company will retain all 12 drivers.

"Our end goal is to operate with two stations, one on High Street (Goodwill) and one at North End, but no, there is no written plan," he told The Mercury.

That unwritten plan would obvi-

ously close the Phillies Fire Co. station on Chestnut Street.

Yerger also conceded there is no written financial analysis detailing where or how the savings will be realized.

Two companies — North End and Goodwill — are more than \$300,000 in debt. The Phillies have no debt.

Understandably, the Phillies have declined to close their fire station and surrender their assets, including a modern fire truck, to a centralized department.

Furthermore, although the position paper states a merger will bring about "improved recruitment capability," it doesn't say how. At present, half the borough's certified volunteer firefighters — 28 strong — are members of the Phillies Fire Co.

Yerger said he hopes many Phillies volunteers will join the newly formed company.

But what if they don't?

What if Pottstown Borough has to hire more paid employees, inevitably leading to a municipal union, with union rules, grievances, and arbitrators?

Easton, for example, has spent \$200,000 over the last 20 years just for arbitration with its firefighters' union (not to mention other negotiating costs).

The current system serves Pottstown well. With all the problems we face, it seems foolish to create one.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

Cost of fire protection per resident, 2015			
	Population	2015 fire budget	Cost per resident
Pottstown	22,582	\$1,392,870	\$62
Allentown	118,577	\$18,502,768	\$156
Bethlehem	75,018	\$10,330,667	\$138
Easton	27,073	\$6,397,203	\$236
Harrisburg	49,188	\$7,733,233	\$157
Lancaster	59,325	\$11,486,118	\$194
Reading	87,893	\$17,521,285	\$199
Scranton	75,806	\$21,737,233	\$287
York	43,935	\$10,261,320	\$234