

Connoquenessing Township's Supervisors held a special meeting on November 18, 2021 at the Connoquenessing Fire Hall. The meeting was called to order by Chairman Terry Steinheiser at 6:00 p.m. Present were Supervisors Terry Steinheiser, Ed Rupert and Ricky Kradel. Also attending were Solicitor Andrew Menchyk, Jr. and Secretary/Asst. Treasurer Brenda Davis to take the minutes. Treasurer/Asst. Secretary Lee Kradel and Engineer Bill Braun did not attend. Twenty-three people signed in on the public sign in record on file. The meeting opened with the Pledge of Allegiance and Prayer.

Steinheiser stated the meeting tonight was to discuss an increase in fire tax and asked Matt McConnell, lieutenant of Connoquenessing Volunteer Fire Company, to do his presentation first and then there would be a comment period.

Matt McConnell, introduced himself and stated he has been a member of the Fire Company for 28 years. Mr. McConnell said the Fire Company has been working with a budget of .5 mill since 1994. Mr. McConnell stated their current engine was purchased for \$180,000 in 1995 and was custom built. Mr. McConnell stated a engine usually lasts 15 years. Mr. McConnell said the Fire Company needs a new building to house this new engine. Mr. McConnell stated the Fire Company has owned the triangle lot at the end of Connoquenessing Main St. and Rt. 68 for 40 years and dreams of having a new Fire Station at that location. Mr. McConnell said the Fire Company is in need of a fire tax increase. He stated the fire tax is based on .5 mill which for every \$1,000 of a residents assessed value equals \$1.00 so .5 mill is \$.50. Mr. McConnell said the area will only grow and he wants a building for the future. Mr. McConnell stated if this Fire Company fails then the Supervisors would either have to get paid fire fighters at approximately \$28.52/hr or bring in another company to service the area. Mr. McConnell stated that most neighboring fire companies are at 2-3 mills. Mr. McConnell presented a slide show. Included in this was showing an average of properties are assessed at \$12,358 meaning residents are currently paying \$6.18/yr (.5 mill) and if increased to 3 mill it would be \$37.07/yr. Mr. McConnell displayed a picture of a designed building (120'x60') prepared by W.K Thomas Engineering which included 4 bays (2 with drive thrus), several offices, meeting room, sleeping rooms, men & women bathroom and shower facilities, fitness area, gear room (a giant walk in closet) to keep gear from being exposed to exhaust fumes and having the firemen be able to change clothes away from the wheels of a truck. Mr. McConnell invited the attendees to come look how tight the current garage is with 4 trucks in 3 bays and where the men have to change. Mr. McConnell pointed out the health issues (cardiac arrest & urinary cancers) that firefighters are dying from at an alarming rate so they need to have a place to protect their gear from these harmful carcinogens and should have one washed uniform at all times. Mr. McConnell stated in 2021 the Fire Company had 137 calls which included 27 vehicle accidents mainly on Rt. 68 which is within their fire district. Mr. McConnell stated 89 calls were Connoquenessing Township and 5 were for the Connoquenessing Borough. He also said Connoquenessing Borough increased their millage last year to 2 mills and has agreed if the Township raises to 3 mills, they will follow. Mr. McConnell had a slide showing the training hours of the fire crew and calls they attended showing they are a very active Fire Company. Mr. McConnell stated the current fire tax of .5 mill was established on January 1, 1994. Mr. McConnell said he received a quote from Pierce Manufacturing for the cost of a new engine would be \$767,092.00. Mr. McConnell explained that the Fire Company has a 4 ISO rating, down from a number 9 which will lower residents fire insurance costs. Mr. McConnell stated a new engine and keeping the current one in service will continue to drop this rating. Mr. McConnell also displayed a conservative proposal from W.K. Thomas Engineering for the building at \$2,000,000. Mr. McConnell stated he can not build a building on a .5 mill fire tax. Mr. McConnell asked for questions/comments.

**COMMENT PERIOD**

Three minute limit pertaining to fire tax

John Tagmyer, from Brandywine, stated 2 mills won't be enough either to get the building and engine. Mr. Tagmyer asked why the Fire Company hasn't been working at this for the last 24 years? Mr. Tagmyer is all for helping the Fire Company but stated going from a .5 mill to 2 mills is over 150% increase and he is lucky to get a 2% increase each year. Mr. Tagmyer feels the time for this request is off with the cost of living and sewer costs also coming. Mr. Tagmyer suggested going after the big businesses that will be flocking the area when sewer comes in instead of taxing the residents. Mr. McConnell stated before he requested this he did a spreadsheet from the County Assessment office which included his family, friends and businesses he is associated with to see how much this will cost them which is very minimal. Mr. Tagmyer agreed but stated with everything else going up it is just hard on the residents. Mr. Scott McCue asked Mr. Tagmyer about what if your house burns down. Mr. Tagmyer stated he doesn't care if his house burns down, he has insurance. Mr. McConnell stated he has presented this presentation before to the Township asking for help but still hasn't received a fire tax increase.

Bill Long, Reiber Rd. resident, told the public no amount of insurance money will cover the loss of a house or lives to a fire. Mr. Long stated the Fire Company also arrives for medical emergencies. Mr. Long stated the Fire Company is well worth a 3 mill increase.

Theresa Dreher, Kriess Rd. resident, asked if the new building will have a meeting room. Mr. McConnell said, "yes" the community is the most important part of the Fire Company and they should be able to hold Boy Scout meetings, Township meetings, birthday parties, etc. at the fire hall. Secondly, Ms. Dreher asked if Mr. McConnell asked for other quotes for the building or engine. Mr. McConnell said, "not yet" because he doesn't want to waste other vendors time until he has a guaranteed income.

Brendan Linton, resident since 2018 feels this proposal is reasonable and feels the work the Fire Company does is phenomenal. Mr. Linton stated he has seen homes burn to the ground and said you want to have a Fire Company that is prepared to save lives. Mr. Linton stated our Fire Company not only does fires but they provide medical services. Mr. Linton stated the city of New Castle has to use Cranberry Township for medical calls. Mr. Linton stated his rate at .5 mill is \$8.84/yr. and will only go to \$35.36/yr. at 2 mills. Mr. Linton also stated if he calls his insurance company telling them the ISO rating, his insurance could go down and actually save him money. Mr. Linton said portable radios costing \$3,000-\$4,000/each) were also recently mandated for Fire Companies to have and some were not covered by grants which also put a burden on them. Mr. Linton feels paying approximately \$35/yr. for fire protection is a bargain for what these volunteers provide.

Greg Doty, resident on Hoffman Lane, agrees to have more proposals but suggests making the building larger to generate more income. Mr. Doty suggested using the hall for banquets, gun bashes, etc. Mr. McConnell stated fire companies that do these fundraisers have more members. Mr. Doty said, "ask for help" and stated he would help with banquets.

Marty Mitchell asked how old the building is. Lou Zimmerman, fire chief, said it was built in the late 1800's. Mr. Mitchell stated he grew up here and remembers the fire hall as a community meeting place. Mr. Mitchell agrees the building should be larger. Mr. Mitchell said he is willing to pay this minimal cost and knows if he needs the fire protection, the Fire Company will be there.

Lee Kradel asked Mr. McConnell what the guaranteed income amount the Fire Company needs and how close they are to that number. Mr. McConnell did not have an exact number just stated that in order to get a loan, the Fire Company must show guaranteed income. Lambert Rosenbaum told Mr. McConnell

that an average loan costs \$4-\$5 per \$1,000 which for these costs would need approximately \$120,000.00 in guaranteed income. Rupert stated 2 mills will give them about \$90,000. Mr. Rosenbaum stated the 2 mills would not generate the needed cash flow and told Mr. McConnell he would have to use USDA to finance and get grants. Mr. Rosenbaum asked how many members. Lou Zimmerman said 41 on average. Mr. McConnell stated they have done well with recruiting because half of them are between 14 and 20 years old. Mr. Rosenbaum stated that is impressive. Mr. Rosenbaum asked for a show of hands of people who have been assisted by a first responder and then said he has too and told the supervisors, "this is a go".

Carol Christner asked what the plans are for this old building. Mr. McConnell stated they will most likely sell it. Lou Zimmerman said the heat in the building with the thermostat set at 52 degrees costs a small fortune.

Calvin Wonderly stated Mr. McConnell presented this same presentation at a Supervisor meeting last year and was told by a supervisor that the Township gave the Fire Company money instead of raising the tax. Mr. Wonderly asked Rupert what funds were given to the Fire Company. Rupert stated the Township gave them \$70,000 last year and \$188,000 this year which included a \$100,000 donation out of the Township's Act 13 money and included \$24,000 from the Foreign Fire Tax. In addition, Rupert stated the Township is required to give the fire company 25% of their Local Services Tax (LST) but last year changed that to 75% which was an additional \$29,000. Mr. Rupert stated Mr. McConnell and Mr. Zimmerman have approached the Township for several years and stated the supervisors know their service is important and have not ignored them. Mr. McConnell told the residents he was not trying to throw the supervisors under the bus. Rupert also noted that the portable radios that were mentioned earlier were paid for by municipalities.

Marty Mitchell mentioned again his support for the increase and stated the Fire Company is working on hardly nothing to get the job done.

Diane Hanchosky, resident on Whitestown Rd., stated Fire Dept.'s run deep in her blood. Ms. Hanchosky stated her husband is a past fire chief and her son is a current fire chief. Ms. Hanchosky said there are so many other things firefighters do other than fighting fires which add expenses. Ms. Hanchosky also stated she works for an insurance company and sees where Fire Dept.'s are billing residents directly for their service. Ms. Hanchosky also feels that the larger companies coming into the Township should be taxed more for fire protection.

Allen Eckstein, resident on Moose Rd., stated he doesn't want to see a fire tax increase but feels the residents have been getting away with a free ride for too many years. Mr. Eckstein says the new building should be made bigger to accommodate community events and new engine and feels the tax that was set back in 1994 is overdue to increase.

Brendan Linton made a last comment that Connoquenessing Borough only had 5 calls and the Township had the rest and the Borough pays more millage than the Township and from that aspect he feels that is unacceptable.

John Tagmyer commended the Fire Company on their service. He also asked the supervisors to go after the new businesses coming in. Lastly, he asked Mr. McConnell if he has done a Projected Cost Analysis because the numbers don't add up. Mr. McConnell said not at this time. Mr. Tagmyer said he will support the fire tax increase.

Tracy St. Clair, treasurer/secretary of Fire Company, stated the Fitness Room would be 100% covered by grants but guaranteed income has to be stated on the application.

Brendan Linton stated the Fire Company can fundraise all they want but that does not count as guaranteed income and that is what they need.

**NEW BUSINESS**

Discuss increase in Fire Tax and possible action was on the agenda and discussed above.

Steinheiser thanked everyone for their comments and Mr. McConnell for his presentation. Steinheiser asked for a raise of hands on who is willing to have a fire tax increase. The majority raised their hands.

**MOTION TO ADJOURN**

Rupert motioned to adjourn at 6:50 p.m. Kradel, seconded. Roll call, yes.

The below was stated on the agenda:

**Note:** Meeting will be held at the Connoquenessing Fire Hall, 180 Connoquenessing Main St. Connoquenessing, PA 16027. Parking is available on Connoquenessing Main Street or the United Methodist Church at 206 Connoquenessing Main Street, Connoquenessing, PA