

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

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## 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 (WFC 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



# Public Safety Services Team

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