

**BENSALEM TOWNSHIP COUNCIL
COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES**

**Monday
June 17th, 2024**

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Ed Kisselback, Council President
Joseph Knowles, Council Vice President
Stacey Champion, Council Secretary – via - phone
Michelle Benitez, Council Member

SUPPORTING PERSONNEL:

Mayor Joseph DiGirolamo
Debora McBreen, Council Clerk/Recording Secretary
William McVey, Director of Public Safety
Neil Morris, Labor Attorney
Ed Rudolph, Township Solicitor

PLEASE NOTE:

The minutes are not verbatim but rather a synopsis of what transpired during the meeting, and while I do my best to attribute remarks and questions to the correct individual, there may be mistakes or omissions because of the “back and forth” dialogue and the lack of the use of the microphone.

1. OPENING OF THE MEETING:

Council President Kisselback opened the meeting with a moment of silence and/or prayer, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance.

2. INTRODUCTION OF COUNCIL MEMBERS, MAYOR AND STAFF:

Council President Kisselback introduced the Supporting Staff and Council Members.

3. WILLIAM MCVEY, DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC SAFETY WILL BE GIVING A PRESENTATION TO COUNCIL AND THE COMMUNITY ON THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE FIRE SERVICES OF BENSALEM:

Director McVey indicated, the meeting this evening is regarding the Township taking a vital step in a very important process to consolidate the six Legacy Fire Companies into one unified Volunteer Fire Department for Bensalem. The reason of consolidation for the six current Fire Companies is important because of the significant decrease in the number of Volunteer

Firefighters and the inability to adequately staff each Firehouse and most importantly the need to ensure an effective fire response to all emergencies. The main problem is the decrease in volunteers. In the 1970's the estimate was 300,000 volunteers in the state of Pennsylvania. In the early 2000's it was down to 60,000 and today, it is under 40,000 in the state.

Unfortunately, Bensalem has followed that same decline. As a Department of Public Safety, the first priority is to provide life safety and protective services through the Police, Fire and EMS. As such, the Department of Public Safety can never risk an inconsistent life safety response to the residents and businesses of Bensalem Township.

The concept of consolidation is not new to Bensalem Township. It was first addressed in the late 1980's as a result of an independent fire study. Then again in 2010 when Bensalem Fire Rescue was formed and most recently in 2022.

Change is never welcomed especially, when it involves a rich history of six Legacy Volunteer Fire Companies in the Bensalem Township. Some with over 100 years of admirable service and tradition.

Immediately upon being sworn in January of 2022 as Director, I was approached by three leaders in the Fire Service from three separate Volunteer Fire Companies all with the same message, in order to sustain a Volunteer Fire Service, consolidation was necessary and overdue.

The message that resonated most with Director McVey was that failure to not consolidate would result in a catastrophic incident involving destruction of property and at worst case, a loss of life. Additionally, it could result in complete failure of the Fire Response System due to the inability to properly staff fire trucks and delayed responses. Director McVey indicated that these were not viable options for Bensalem Township.

Based upon these conversations, Deputy Director Race and Director McVey made it a priority for the Department of Public Safety. They immediately met with Mayor DiGirolamo, his Administration and the elected Officials of the Bensalem Township Council. They explained the dire situation that faced the Bensalem community if they did not have the courage to change and adapt.

Thankfully, the elected Officials and the Mayor understood the need for change and gave the "green light" to explore the consolidation process. Following those talks, the Township hired the services of Rob Brady Consulting to assist and guide the efforts.

A Consolidation Committee was formed which consists of two representatives from each of the six Legacy Companies. Over the past two 2 ½ years there has been dozens of meetings, sub-committee meetings, Town Hall style meetings. These meetings were held so that all members of the Companies could participate in this process.

The key element for success of this consolidation was from the beginning, and is now, for all six Legacy Companies to participate, unify as one, and form this new Department together. Transparency was also a very important piece of this process. Deputy Director Race and Director McVey visited every firehouse, whenever requested, to ensure there was open communication with the volunteers and the Township.

This was not an easy task and involved many roadblocks, varied opinions, and many false accusations about jeopardizing Public Safety in this Township. Director McVey indicated that because of the efforts of all of the Township's Volunteer Firemen these obstacles have been overcome so much so that the final vote to consolidate was an overwhelming 156 to 6 in favor to move forward with consolidation of Fire Services.

The leadership from all six Legacy Companies signed a formal resolution authorizing and directing their companies to join and form the newly incorporated Bensalem Volunteer Fire Department (BVFD).

There is still work to be done and final approvals will need to be obtained from the Bucks County Court of Common Pleas and the Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General.

However, this evening a final Resolution has been provided and will be read into the record by Bensalem Council. Once approved and signed, Bensalem Township will officially recognize the Bensalem Volunteer Fire Department as the sole and exclusive Volunteer Fire Company of Bensalem Township.

Director McVey turned the meeting over to Mayor DiGirolamo who indicated that this was a long process. The Mayor congratulated all involved for their hard work. This could not have been done without all of the Volunteers working together. Bensalem is very fortunate to have this kind of team working together. Safety is the number one priority of the Bensalem Community. The Mayor believes that this is the right direction and thanked all of the Volunteers for their hard work and indicated it could not be done without them. God Bless our Volunteers!

Director McVey thanked the Mayor and Council for their support that they have given throughout this process.

Director McVey asked President Kisselback to read into the record the prepared Resolution for Council consideration and approval in the interest of Public Safety with the Fire Services.

President Kisselback read into the record the proposed Resolution:

**A RESOLUTION OF THE TOWNSHIP OF BENSLEM,
BUCKS COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA, RECOGNIZING THE MANY CONTRIBUTIONS OF
THE SEVERAL VOUNTEER FIRE COMPANIES CURRENTLY SERVING THE
TOWNSHIP, AND APPROVING THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE TOWNSHIP'S SIX
EXISTING VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANIES SO AS TO CREATE A NEW UNIFIED
VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANY, TO BE KNOWN AS THE BENSLEM VOLUNTEER FIRE
DEPARTMENT, AND TO BE DESIGNATED AS THE SOLE AND EXCLUSIVE
VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANY SERVING AND RECOGNIZED BY THE TOWNSHIP**

WHEREAS, for more than a century, the brave and devoted volunteers and members of the Cornwells Fire Company, the Eddington Fire Company, the Newport Fire Company, the Nottingham Fire Department, the Trevoise Fire Company, and the Union Fire Company (collectively, the "Legacy

Companies”) have provided volunteer fire services to the Township of Bensalem and its grateful citizens and businesses; and

WHEREAS, the Township recognizes, and appreciates, the significant contributions that the Legacy Companies have provided to the Township throughout that time; and

WHEREAS, both the Township and the Legacy Companies recognize the challenges that the Legacy Companies, and Volunteer Fire Services in general, continue to face in providing adequate and efficient firefighting and emergency services to the Township, its citizens and businesses; and

WHEREAS, in an effort to confront and overcome the aforementioned challenges, and to continue and to enhance the volunteer fire and emergency services provided to the Township by the volunteers and members of the Legacy Companies, and following nearly two years of discussion, meetings, research, and deliberation among and between the members of the Legacy Companies, working together with, and in cooperation with, various officials and representatives of the Township, the Legacy Companies have unanimously voted and agreed to consolidate all of the Legacy Companies so as to create and form a single, unified volunteer fire company, to be known as the Bensalem Volunteer Fire Department, to serve the Township, its citizens and businesses; and

WHEREAS, the Bensalem Volunteer Fire Department has been incorporated by the Legacy Companies as a separate business and corporate entity of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, governed by its own charter, bylaws, Directors, and leadership, and, like the Legacy Companies before it, the Bensalem Volunteer Fire Department is a volunteer fire company, independent of the Township, that will work together with the Township to provide fire protection within the Township, for the health, safety and welfare of the Township, in accordance with the various provisions of the Pennsylvania Second Class Township Code and the Code of the Township of Bensalem relating to, and pertaining to, Fire Companies, Fire Prevention and Protection, and Public Safety; and

WHEREAS, by ordinance of the Township, the Legacy Companies are currently the only volunteer fire companies formally recognized and financially supported by the Township; and

WHEREAS, having received formal notification from the Legacy Companies of their desire and decision to disband the existing Legacy Companies as volunteer fire companies serving the

Township, and to create and form, in their place, a single, unified volunteer fire company to serve the entirety of the Township of Bensalem, and following public presentation of the same to the Township Council and the citizens and taxpayers of the Township at a publicly advertised meeting of the Township Council held on this date, it is the intention of the Township Council, through this Resolution, to concur with, and otherwise support, the proposed consolidation of the Legacy Companies and their creation and formation of a single, unified volunteer fire company in their place, such newly created volunteer fire company is to be known as the Bensalem Volunteer Fire Department, such newly created Bensalem Volunteer Fire Department is to be designated as the sole and exclusive volunteer fire company serving, recognized by, and supported by the Township of Bensalem.

NOW, THEREFORE, IT IS HEREBY RESOLVED that the Council of the Township of Bensalem, Bucks County, Pennsylvania hereby adopts this Resolution in recognition of its concurrence with, and support of, the consolidation of the Cornwells Fire Company, the Eddington Fire Company, the Newport Fire Company, the Nottingham Fire Department, the Trevoise Fire Company, and the Union Fire Company so as to create and form a single, unified volunteer fire company, to be known as the Bensalem Volunteer Fire Department; and

IT IS HEREBY FURTHER RESOLVED that, as the Bensalem Volunteer Fire Department has been incorporated by the Legacy Companies as a volunteer fire company that is a separate business and corporate entity of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, independent of the Township, governed by its own charter, bylaws, Directors, and leadership, that like the Legacy Companies before it, will work together with the Township to provide fire protection within the Township, for the health, safety and welfare of the Township, in accordance with the various provisions of the Pennsylvania Second Class Township Code and the Code of the Township of Bensalem relating to, and pertaining to, Fire Companies, Fire Prevention and Protection, and Public Safety, such newly created Bensalem Volunteer Fire Department shall be, and is, hereby designated as the sole and exclusive volunteer fire company serving, recognized by, and supported by, the Township of Bensalem, effective June 18, 2024; and

IT IS HEREBY FURTHER RESOLVED that the Mayor, the Director of Administration, the Director of Public Safety, and the Township Solicitor are hereby authorized to prepare, execute, and/or

file, on behalf of the Township, any and all documents necessary to effectuate the intent and purposes of this Resolution, and to prepare and advertise, for consideration and adoption by Council, any and all Ordinances necessary to effectuate the intent and purposes of this Resolution.

RESOLVED this 17TH day of June, 2024.

Council President Kisselback asked if there was anyone in the audience who would like to make a comment. Seeing no one come forward the Public portion was closed.

Councilwoman Benitez motioned to approve the consolidation of the six existing Volunteer Fire Companies so as to create a new unified Volunteer Fire Company to be known as the Bensalem Volunteer Fire Department and to be designated as a sole and exclusive Volunteer Fire Company serving and recognized by the Township. Council Vice President Knowles seconded and President Kisselback asked for a roll call vote: Michelle Benitez, Aye, Joe Knowles, Aye, Stacey Champion, Aye, as well as Ed Kisselback, Aye. Unanimous 4-0.

5. **WILLIAM MCVEY, DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC SAFETY AND BOB RACE, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC SAFETY TO INTRODUCE THE EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS AND CHIEF OFFICERS OF THE NEWLY FORMED BENSALEM VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANY AND THE SWEARING IN OF THOSE OFFICERS.**

Director McVey indicated Deputy Director, Bob Race, played a critical role in this process, and he has been a 30-year volunteer fireman. This process would not have got done without Deputy Director Race's leadership. Also, Chief Mark Antozzeski was part of the process and the Steering Committee felt it necessary the Township hire a first time ever career Fire Chief. Chief Antozzeski will be the main liaison with the new leadership of the new independent Volunteer Fire Department.

Deputy Director Race introduced and read the bios of the new officers of the Bensalem Volunteer Fire Department.

Andrew M. Hazlett, President

Andrew M. Hazlett was born and raised in Bensalem Township and has been a member of the Newport Fire Company since October of 1999. During his time with Newport, he has worked his way through both administrative and operational ranks, most recently holding the position of Assistant Chief and President. Mr. Hazlett is the Director of Quality Assurance for an engineering firm that provides specialized products and technical services to the US Government, Commercial Market, and Academia.

Tom Markert, Vice President

Tom Markert has been a member of Eddington Fire Company since September of 1986. Over the years he has held many leadership positions both administrative and operational. A Mechanical Engineer by training, he started his own successful manufacturing company in 1993 that now employs a staff of 47 and based in 4 countries. His twin sons, Jacob and Chris are also both active firefighters in the township.

Tom Tennesen, Secretary

Tom Tennesen joined Cornwells Fire Company in June of 2022. He has participated in numerous administrative projects, some of which have included training manuals and inventory. He is a graduate of The Wharton School of Business and is employed as a Process Improvement Manager.

Larry Ackerman, Treasurer

Larry Ackerman has been a member of Trevoise Fire Company and then Cornwells Fire Company since September of 2003. In that span he has held several leadership positions including Fire Chief and Trustee. He has been a Paramedic with several local organizations since 2012 and is currently a career Fire Lieutenant for the City of Philadelphia.

Marty Joyce, Head Trustee

Marty Joyce has been a member of Trevoise Fire Company since June of 1978. He has over 30 years as a Chief Fire Officer with three years as Fire Chief. He also has served in several administrative positions and is currently the President of Trevoise Fire Company. He has been employed by the Montgomery County Fire Academy since 2013 as Hazmat Training Coordinator also teaches fire, hazardous materials, fire officer and incident command related classes for the Bucks County Community College for over 30 years. He teaches firefighters, police and military personnel locally and internationally. He is also a published writer and content creator of numerous training curriculum.

Nicholas Altomare, Body Delegate

Nicholas Altomare was born and raised in Bensalem Township. He has been a member of Newport Fire Company since November of 2001. Over the years he has served many operational leadership positions within the Company. In 2013 he became a member of the Nottingham Fire Department. He is employed by Bensalem Fire Rescue since 2010 where he holds the rank of Lieutenant.

The Administrative Board was sworn in by Judge Gallagher under the following Loyalty Oath:

“I (state your name) do solemnly swear, that I will uphold the constitution and bylaws of the Bensalem Volunteer Fire Department.”

“I further promise and swear, that I will to the best of my ability, perform the duties of the office to which I have been elected or appointed.”

“I will preserve and maintain, all properties entrusted to my care, and will turn over same to my successor, at the termination of my office.”

“So, help me God.”

Deputy Director Race introduced and read the bios of the Operational Chiefs of the Bensalem Volunteer Fire Department.

Ron Harris, Deputy Chief

Ron Harris was born and raised in Bensalem Township where he started in the fire service with Nottingham Fire Department in February 1981. Ron has held several officer positions within the fire department. In 1998 Ron was elected Chief, which he has held for the past 27 years. During his tenure, he was the chairman of the building committee for the construction of the Bensalem Training Facility. Ron was also instrumental in working with the Director of Public Safety Fred Harran on the need to start Bensalem Fire Rescue.

Ron worked for the County of Bucks for 35 years as a Boiler Engineer and retired in 2022. Ron also has worked for Bensalem Fire Marshal's Office & Bensalem Fire Rescue since January 2005 as a Firefighter/Fire Inspector and will be retiring in June of 2024.

James McDonough, 1st Assistant Chief

James McDonough has been a member of Newport Fire Company for 33 years. During his time served, he has held every operational position including his current position as Chief. He has also worked for Bensalem Fire Rescue for the last 22 years. He is currently employed as a career firefighter with the Department of Defense where he has worked for 21 years.

Scott Rhoads, 2nd Assistant Chief

Scott Rhoads, born and raised in Bensalem, has been dedicated to the fire service since 2006. In 2012, he advanced to a career fireman, demonstrating his commitment and expertise in the field. Scott has held multiple positions at Cornwells Fire Company and currently serves as both the President and Deputy Chief. Coming from a proud lineage of firefighters, Scott follows in the footsteps of his grandfather, father, and uncle, all lifetime members of Cornwells Fire Company. His dedication and leadership continue to uphold the family's legacy of service.

David Neil, 3rd Assistant Chief (Bensalem Resident)

David Neil III has been a member of Eddington Fire Company since December of 1994. During his time served, he has held numerous operational positions including Fire Chief for 5 years. He is also, a career firefighter for almost 24 years where he holds the position of Battalion Chief at the Joint Base M-D-L Fire Department. David also has been married to his wife Kathy for almost 20 years and has two boys David the IV and Jaxson. David the IV is currently serving as a cadet firefighter at Eddington Fire Company.

The Operational Chiefs were sworn in by Judge Gallagher under the same Loyalty Oath as the Administrative Board of the Bensalem Volunteer Fire Department.

Director McVey thanked all of the Volunteers and a special thanks to the Director's Administrative Assistant, Ann Marie Walsh, who attended every meeting and took notes to forward to Council to keep them informed of the ongoing process.

6. SWEARING IN OF THE EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS AND CHIEF OFFICERS OF THE BENSELEM VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT:

Agenda Item #6 was combined with Agenda Item #5.

7. THE PRESIDENT OF THE BENSELEM VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT, ANDREW M. HAZLETT, WILL MAKE A STATEMENT:

BVFD President Hazlett indicated that he was joined here today by the dedicated men and women who proudly serve the Bensalem Township providing Fire and Emergency Services. The Volunteer Fire Service has deep roots within our Township dating back to 1915 with the founding of the first Fire Company. Over many decades additional Fire Companies have been formed throughout the Bensalem Community bringing the total number to six.

Despite the six Fire Companies being independent from one another, they have all shared a common purpose, to save lives and protect property for the residents and businesses of Bensalem Township. Fast forward to today and that common purpose still stands true for each of the Legacy Fire Companies.

However, over the years, the Volunteer Fire Companies have collectively experienced a decline in the most critical piece of their infrastructure, and that is the personnel as Emergency Responders. They have all faced challenging situations, yet the decline of personnel within each of the Legacy Companies has certainly been their biggest challenge to overcome.

In the face of reduced membership and leadership with support from the members they decided that a consolidation was necessary to continue to ensure adequate Fire and Emergency Response within the Township to better serve the needs of the Bensalem Community. This has been a long and arduous process that has spanned more than two years.

President Hazlett echoed a very important word that the Mayor believes in highly and that is "teamwork." And an allegiance to the success of the BVFD these men and woman stand before you as one united group ready to continue serving Bensalem Township.

On behalf of the Officers and members of the BVFD they would like to publicly thank Public Safety Director, Bill McVey, Deputy Director, Bob Race, Administrative Assistant, Ann Marie Walsh, Mayor Joseph DiGirolamo, Bensalem Council and Administration, Fire Chief Mark Antozzeski and Rob Brady and his team from Rob Consulting, LLC. The working relationship with Township Officials and political support were key factors in the success of the consolidation process.

8. PUBLIC COMMENT:

Council President Kisselback asked if there was anyone in the audience who would like to come forward. Seeing no one come forward, the second Public Comment Portion was closed.

9. **OTHER BUSINESS:**

Director McVey thanked everyone and looks forward to the future.

Solicitor Rudolph shared in the pride of the Township.

The Mayor indicated that it is an incredible thing what the Township is doing with the consolidation of the six Legacy Fire Companies. This is change, it doesn't come easy and it hasn't been easy. The Mayor was so proud of the solidarity of the six Legacy Volunteer Fire Companies and how they all worked together through the process.

The Mayor thanked Director McVey and Deputy Director Race for all of their hard work.

Councilwoman Benitez indicated that Bensalem is a Community of First. And it is because of the dedicated Fire Volunteers making sure that the Bensalem Community is safe. Very grateful for all that they do and indicated that it is a very proud moment for Bensalem.

Councilwoman Benitez added that she serves on the Bucks County Association of Township Officials and thanked Deputy Director Race for representing at their previous event the very topic of this evening. Bensalem sets the tone and has the best leadership with getting so much done. Thanks to all.

Council Vice President Knowles re-emphasized that these men sworn in are volunteers and thanked them for stepping up in the community and thanked them for their services.

Council Secretary Champion Thanked everyone involved for all of their hard work over the past two years. To quote the Mayor, it took "teamwork". We would not have an amazing Township without all of the people who are willing to roll up their sleeves and discuss to find the best solution for everybody, most importantly the residents of Bensalem Township and is looking forward to the next chapter of the Bensalem Volunteer Fire Company.

Council President Kisselback every individual of every Fire Company knew the right thing to do regarding the consolidation. Thanked everyone involved for their hard work.

10. **ADJOURNMENT:**

With no other business to conduct, the meeting was adjourned.

The Special Bensalem Township Council Meeting of June 17th, 2024 can be viewed in its entirety at the following websites:

www.bensalempa.gov

or

www.youtube.com

Respectfully submitted,

Debra F. McBreen
Recording Secretary/Council Clerk