

Adams, Franklin municipalities join in lobbying efforts.

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Adams County is taking steps to save its volunteer fire departments.

At a recent meeting, the Adams County Council of Governments voted to join with neighboring Franklin County in its efforts to lobby state government to provide financial incentives for local volunteer fire departments.

"Organizations are having an extremely tough time getting volunteers," said Cumberland Township manager Ben Thomas in a presentation to the COG last week. "In 1976, Pennsylvania had 300,000 volunteer firefighters and now we have about 50,000."

Times are changing, said Thomas, who identified several societal shifts that have hurt volunteer departments.

"It used to be that business leaders took an active role," Thomas said, explaining that businesses used to offer discounts to firefighters or let them leave work to respond to a call.

A study by the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency identified this shift as well, reporting that today many locally owned businesses have been replaced by corporate-owned businesses, "that are not as closely connected to the community and are, therefore, less committed to supporting community volunteerism."

Thomas also identified a busier world as a reason for declining volunteer rates, saying that the municipalities lose a lot of junior volunteers, "because of other social engagements." A rise in multi-earner households has also made it difficult for firefighters to handle the demands of family, work, and volunteering, said the PEMA study.

"It was not too long ago that the volunteer fire company was the center of the community," Thomas said, but in the face of changing times companies have had difficulty raising money and have had to spend a lot more time doing so.

Volunteer firefighters today feel like they spend more time fundraising than actually fighting fires, a point of nuisance for many volunteers according to a 2012 report by The Center for Rural Pennsylvania. It can be so much of a nuisance that the report found, "that the more fundraising events the company sponsored, the more firefighters that left the company or became inactive."

There's also been a drop in the amount of time spent fighting fires. From 1977 to 2010 the number of annual structure fires nationwide fell from 1.1 million to 482,000, as reported by the National Fire Protection Association.

But firefighters are still important and if volunteer levels fall too low, municipalities will have to pick up the tab by paying for professional fire services, said Thomas.

"The last thing we want to get involved in," Thomas said, "is a full-time professional fire service."

He said that the expense would be crushing for already cash-strapped municipalities, citing a position paper written by the Franklin County Emergency Services Alliance, which estimated that volunteers save the state \$6 billion annually. In order to keep this cost-saving system in place, Thomas put forth a list of incentives for Adams and Franklin counties to push legislators to establish at the state level. These included a \$500 tax credit, a higher education tuition credit, and a business tax credit for businesses that allow volunteers to leave during work to respond to emergencies.

Thomas also suggested awarding pension plans to volunteers who have worked for a certain number of years, although that option might still be cost prohibitive, due to the rising costs of pension plans for other state employees and police. The Commonwealth Fund estimated that from now until the fiscal year 2016-17, taxpayer contributions to state employee pension plans will increase by 263 percent, without adding any new group of beneficiaries to the system.

But, Thomas persisted, "any incentive helps. I have friends who have been volunteers for 40 years and because of their pensions, they are still helping."