



Township Fire Departments: Handling the Heat

By Jenn Fiedler,
MTA Communications Specialist



Perhaps no other township service is as visible—and as recognizable—as the township fire department. Fire trucks are a fixture in any township parade, and firefighters, either visiting schools to discuss fire safety with students or on their way home from battling a blaze, are icons to township residents. Critical community service organizations, they continue to represent the good in our society—bravery, selflessness, and commitment to the community and to the common good.

No statute requires townships to have a fire department. While a township board has, by law, the responsibility to protect the safety, health and welfare of its residents, it has broad latitude to decide how to fulfill that responsibility. To the best of MTA's knowledge, all Michigan townships have some provision—be it through contracting, mutual aid or owning their own department—for fire protection. In fact, as of 2000, some 800 of Michigan's 1,075 fire departments were either township-owned, or jointly owned by municipalities, including at least one township.

Despite the challenge of evolving technology, increased training but decreased funding, and a firefighter shortage, township fire departments—whether from a small, rural township or a large, urban one—are continuing to handle the heat.



The Board's Relationship with the Department

The primary statute enabling townships to provide fire protection is Public Act 33 of 1951 (MCL 41.801, *et seq.*). The township board does not “run” the department, however—it governs it. The board has authority to decide how much money to spend on fire protection, define the department’s mission, establish goals and policies to ensure the department runs smoothly and meets community expectations, select department personnel, and monitor department finances and activities.

Key responsibilities for the board are policy-setting and budget approval, according to **Thomas Township** (Saginaw Co.) Supervisor **Bob Weise**. “We don’t want to micromanage,” he said. “We believe the fire chief is the expert in the day-to-day operations of the department, and feel he does a great job.”

Fire chiefs agree that, while they oversee daily department operations and personnel, it is critical that the board be aware of how the department operates. According to **Gary Pullen**, who has served as fire chief for **Cherry Grove Township** (Wexford Co.) for 25 years, “It’s paramount that the board stays abreast of happenings in the department. They are as intertwined as closely as we can keep them, and have a good working knowledge of the department.”

Open communication is essential, according to both fire officials and board members. “Our township manager runs the day-to-day operations of the township, and he deals with department heads, of which the fire chief is one,” Weise said. “The chief also attends our monthly meetings, giving us reports and allowing us to ask any questions we might have. Both the board and the fire chief have an open-door policy—if something comes up, we can talk with one another about it. It’s a very casual, open relationship.”

Added **Ron Vaughan**, Cherry Grove Township supervisor, “Our fire chief provides the board with a monthly report including all the training the personnel undergoes, all the runs they go on.” Vaughan has no trouble keeping in touch with the fire chief: “I have coffee with him every morning at the township,” he said. “We have a very good relationship.”

In **Canton Charter Township** (Wayne Co.), the director of public safety acts as the conduit between the department and the board. “We work with the public safety director to identify needs,” said Chief **Mike Rorabacher**, who has headed the township’s fire department for 12 years.

Canton Charter Township Supervisor **Tom Yack** further explained, “Our situation—the fire chief answers to the public safety director, who answers to the supervisor—is a little unusual for townships, but it works very well, especially if you have, like we do, strong leadership in our public safety director and fire chief.”

No matter what your township structure—administered solely by the township board, with a manager, or even with a public safety director—it is the active involvement and participation with and for the fire department that is essential for all townships.

Evaluating the Department

Often a key function of the township board’s relationship with the fire department is working with the fire chief to evaluate the department—how good is it? How well can it protect the township from fire? In the past, it may have seemed outside the board’s expertise to undertake such an evaluation, or could have been construed as a perceived lack of confidence in the department and its personnel.

However, evaluation is critical to ensure the department is performing up to the township’s needs and expectations. It is also important to remember that evaluation is not a one-time activity, with a beginning and an end; it is an ongoing process.

“We are constantly evaluating our department, our strengths and weaknesses,” said **Jim Peterson**, who has been the Thomas Township fire chief for 13 years. “In addition to a yearly evaluation—to go over everything, including budget, personnel and operations—the township manager and I also talk weekly about the department and what is taking place. We have a good relationship with the township board, and are able to give and take one another’s ideas.”

With communities growing at leaps and bounds over the past decade, township and fire department officials must work together to ensure that community needs

are met. Questions to consider include:

- Does the department have the resources to protect more complex structures?
- Are personnel sufficiently trained?
- Should more emphasis be placed on fire prevention and code enforcement?

Evaluating the fire department in a systematic manner should be neither threatening to the department nor a chore beyond the township’s ability. Many tools are available to help the township board, along with the fire chief and other personnel, evaluate the department. The National Fire Prevention Administration (NFPA) has adopted several standards—including NFPA 1710, a standard for career departments, and NFPA 1720, a standard for volunteer departments—both of which are excellent tools to identify minimum components of a department. (Visit <http://catalog.nfpa.org> to order a copy of NFPA standards.) The Insurance Services Office (ISO) also keeps tabs on each community’s fire department resources and assigns a number grade by comparing the community’s personnel, equipment and water supplies against ISO standards.

Townships should also evaluate how the department’s functions compare to board-set expectations, as well as obtain input from those who are on the front lines for the township every day—the firefighters and other department personnel.

Rorabacher said that Canton Charter Township’s evaluation process covers a lot of ground to ensure a well-rounded process. “The department uses a multipurpose annual ‘Employee Development System’ survey, to ensure that we are meeting employees’ expectations and that the employee is meeting the expectations of the department. We solicit opinions on work environment, leadership and communications,” he explained.

“The department also establishes annual goals and strategies in cooperation with the elected township officials and with employees to ensure that everyone has input and the needs of the citizens are addressed.”

Finding—and Keeping—Qualified Personnel

Whether a fire department’s firefighters are full-time employees, paid, on-call fighters

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or volunteers, over the past several decades, finding—and keeping—qualified, capable personnel has been a challenge for departments nationwide.

“The real problem is time,” noted Pullen, who oversees the department’s 20 paid, on-call firefighters, who not only cover the township, but neighboring **Henderson Township** as well. “The generation of new firefighters has so much on their docket, work-wise and in terms of pleasure activities.”

Additional reasons often cited for the decline in numbers include extensive training requirements, new residents who aren’t as connected or committed to the community, fewer self-employed residents who can leave work to respond to an emergency, and bedroom communities where fewer residents are available to respond to daytime calls.

Cherry Grove responded to that issue by lifting the requirement that firefighters be residents of the township. “It helps tremendously,” Pullen said. “One of our fighters doesn’t live in the township, but works here, and is able to leave work if I need him in the afternoon—which is one of the times I need fighters most.”

Despite the obvious temptations, it’s critical that townships do not make the mistake of lowering hiring standards when faced with personnel shortfalls. Allowing persons with questionable judgment or character to join the department can hurt the overall morale of the department, and tarnish its reputation in the community.

Canton Charter Township has a budget for 54 full-time firefighters to staff its two—soon to be three—fire stations, but has been trying to fill seven positions since February. Rorabacher does not blame the lengthy search on a lack of qualified candidates, but rather on the department’s quest for highly qualified individuals.

“We have a hiring process that brings in quality candidates,” Rorabacher said, noting that candidates must have Level I and II firefighter certification and must be a paramedic. “That narrows down the pool considerably,” he said.

Once firefighters join the department, however, “we don’t have a lot of difficulty retaining firefighters,” he continued. “We offer a competitive salary and benefits package, but it’s not just the money. This job

gives the individual a sense of accomplishment; they see the good that they do, and know that they make a difference. We try to get good, accomplished people, and that drives them.”

The Thomas Township Fire Department has also been fortunate to not see a lot of turnover in its 37-member, paid on-call staff. “It’s a growing community and there are new things going on,” Peterson explained. “The township is good to us, with up-to-date equipment, and that seems to hold interest.”

Township boards can provide more than monetary support—recognition of the department also helps firefighters and personnel know that they are appreciated. “We have a very positive relationship between the township board and fire department,” Weise said. “We support them by being visible and positive about the department, and attending department activities, like their annual open house or pancake breakfast.” The township also holds an annual awards appreciation dinner for the township fire department.

Cherry Grove Township also works hard to retain firefighters—and the efforts have paid off. The average firefighter remains with the department for 10 years, and some continue to serve after more than 30 years. Pullen attends every township board meeting and makes a point of recognizing the efforts of several firefighters at each meeting, keeping the board—and the public—aware of the work the department is doing.

“Just thanking them is a big issue,” Pullen said. “They could have fought a fire for four hours, and then leave the station without anyone saying ‘thank you.’ It doesn’t take much to show appreciation.”

The chief and fire officials play a large

role in retention, according to Vaughan. “We have an ‘A-plus’ fire department, and even though times are tough for recruiting, we have a large force of volunteers—and that is due in large part to the chief and officers who provide energy and enthusiasm to the department,” he said.

Department is Linked with Community

Township firefighters do more than just put out fires—they, and the chief, are often seen as ambassadors to the community. This interaction with the community is critical—if residents perceive that the department is not meeting their expectations, it can result in further difficulty recruiting volunteers or garnering support for extra-voted millages.

Increasing the visibility of the department



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mote fire prevention and safety issues as well. Thomas Township department personnel frequently go into schools and churches to conduct fire prevention and bicycle safety programs. They also host an annual open house, giving tours of the fire station, and “that goes over very well,” Peterson said.

“We make these efforts to make sure everyone is safe—the more education we do in the community, the more fires we stop from happening, and the more lives and property we save,” he added.

township was able to lower this year—as well as money from the general fund. In addition, the township has implemented a per-run, or per-service fee for certain services. According to Rorabacher, residents are charged \$350, and non-residents are charged \$500 for EMS transports. “It is our experience that most of our patients have insurance to cover these costs,” he said. The township also has a cost-recovery ordinance for hazardous materials incidents, which can be very costly to respond to.

“Assessing user fees has become very popular within the fire service,” he continued. “It is very important that fire administration be cognizant of the wishes of elected officials and residents on this matter. Some municipalities believe that all operating costs are included in the taxes that residents pay, while others may wish to keep the taxes to a minimum and recover costs through user fees.”

Thomas Township funds its fire department, which includes two stations and an administrative office, both from the general

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is an effective way to shore up community support. According to Rorabacher, “We take every opportunity we can to make appearances in public, so we know what the community has to say. The more accessible we are, the faster they will be to call the office when they have a need.”

Codes of conduct and behavior expectations for the department are essential—personnel should always reflect favorably on the community, and be courteous and professional when dealing with the public.

Pullen agrees that presence in the community can result in greater trust and confidence in the department. “Cherry Grove Township was among the first small townships to hire a full-time fire chief,” said Pullen, a township native. “It’s a very visible position.”

He continued, “The residents have learned to trust the department; we have good firefighters and we have earned a good reputation in the community.”

Being active in the community helps pro-

Community Support Translates to Funding Support

When the community feels a connection and trust for the fire department, that support is often carried over into financial support. While the board may appropriate funds from the township general fund to defray the cost of housing, staffing and equipping the fire department, many departments also utilize extra-voted millages to help fund the department. In addition, state-shared revenues and any other unrestricted revenues may be appropriated for fire department expenses, or a special assessment district could be established.


Canton Charter Township’s fire department is funded by a dedicated fire millage—which the

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funding is the good old-fashioned bake sale, auction or raffle. Townships may auction off a ride on a fire truck, or hold a monthly pancake breakfast to raise additional funds. In Cherry Grove Township, “we have a very active Ladies Auxiliary,” Pullen said. “They hold a once-a-year bake sale, and raise \$2,000 to \$3,000 for the department just at that one sale. It’s just incredible.”

Doing More with Less

Despite continued support from the community, many departments are facing the same challenge that nearly every other township has endured—economic downturns. According to Rorabacher, Canton Charter Township is feeling the heat. “Recent cuts in revenue sharing have impacted us. We have to make do with less, and have to be very cognizant of it. We really need to establish our credibility to get any funding, and are constantly looking at ways to save costs.”

fund and by a public safety operating millage which is split between the police and fire departments. The fire department receives .625 mills from the 1½-mill millage.

Voters must approve an extra-voted millage, which must be authorized for a specific length of time, not to exceed 20 years. Thomas Township’s millage was renewed “overwhelmingly” in 1994, according to Peterson.

Not to be overlooked for fire department

Among the best ways to expand services without expanded costs is mutual aid and automatic response agreements with neighboring communities. Canton Charter Township has been a part of the Western Wayne County Fire Department Mutual Aid Association for more than 40 years. The association—which became a “public body corporate” under the Urban Cooperation Act (PA 7 of 1967) in 2003—offers the involved municipalities the training and services of 24 departments from Wayne, Washtenaw and Oakland Counties, including a nationally recognized hazardous materials (HAZMAT) team.

The agreement has helped maintain important services while keeping costs down. “We are depending on each other more and more, rather than have a duplication of services,” Rorabacher explained.

New technology has meant improvements in equipment, which often requires spending more money, and providing additional training for fire-fighting personnel—which can be difficult when a department is scaling back.



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“MIOSHA and NFPA requirements are a huge driving force,” Pullen said. “They keep coming up with new things, and it can be hard to comply. Money is an issue. If the department needs to buy a lot of stuff, someone has to come up with the funds. Do we comply with the law or replace a 30-year-old truck?”

One way a lot of departments are complying with ever-expanding training and equipment requirements is, once again, working with other communities.

As Rorabacher put it, “There is a way to comply with all the rules, and get the job done. We could spend \$700,000 on a new truck—that’s enough to hire a firefighter for a lifetime—or we could buy equipment with other communities. Joint ventures have to be explored.”

Thomas Township works with other communities to bring in speakers and train several departments at the same time. The township uses in-house speakers, saving money by having one firefighter trained on a certain procedure or piece of equipment, who in turn trains the other firefighters in the department. Saginaw County also brings in speakers and offers training to the whole county, on such topics as air bag safety when responding to an automobile accident and incidence response to terrorism.

Said Peterson, “Revenue sharing cuts have hit our township, and we’ve had to scale back on equipment purchases, and capital improvement projects have been put on hold. But we won’t scale back on training. We have to have the equipment and training to deal with more issues now—chemical and biological threats; we have to be prepared.

“While there are more training requirements, we feel good knowing that our firefighters are trained, and knowing it’s going to be safer for them. That’s the bottom line.”

Taking mutual aid one step further, some townships are already looking down the road to the future of fire service in their areas. “This is a ways out there, but consolidation of departments is an issue that we are starting to talk about,” Pullen noted. “We don’t have new people knocking down our doors, and we need to keep experience in the department. With long-time fighters retiring, the departments can be losing 30 years of fire-fighting experience.

“We may need to merge departments to get experienced fighters to an incident as fast as possible. It may be the only way some of us will be able to survive.”

Looking to the Future

As township fire departments continue to evolve and adapt to changing needs, requirements and challenges, they carry on a tradition of providing quality care and essential services for residents. An effective fire department can be a source of pride for a community, and the township board and fire department officials must work together to make a conscious effort to meet the community’s expectations. ■

MTA offers numerous resources for townships and fire department, including two publications, On-Call Fire Departments: The Township Board’s Responsibilities, and Successful Approaches to Governing a Fire Department. Also, a workshop, Joint Fire Service Agreements Revealed, will be offered during MTA’s 2005 Annual Conference, January 25-28, in Detroit.

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