

**What are the different ways fire protection is provided by townships? How is the cost of fire protection funded by a township and at what meeting is the extent of that cost approved? What challenges are faced by rural fire departments in providing fire protection?**

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A government's 'first duty' – to protect its citizens – was outlined almost 250 years ago in the Constitution of the United States. This duty is more important and complicated than ever, and every unity of government takes the responsibility to preserve, protect, and defend its people and property very seriously. Our local township leadership meets this obligation by providing fire protection to all citizens.

There are several ways townships can live up to their fire protection duty. A town with more resources and people may choose to organize its own municipal fire department. Another way is to enter into a contract for fire protection with a neighboring township or city. A township may also choose to fulfill this 'first duty' by forming a Joint Powers Agreement with one or more townships or cities. Lastly, a town may form a Rural Fire Association, which is a private entity that has townships and/or cities as its members. About fifty Minnesota townships, including my home township, choose this route. Our local Fire Association, a collaboration of six townships and one city, meets annually and sets the cost of fire protection for each of the members based on the value of the property within their borders.

A recent State Auditor's report notes that fire protection is the third largest expenditure faced by townships. Local property taxes are the largest source of revenue available to meet this significant expense, followed by grants, special assessments, and fees and permits. There is little, if any, direct state aid to townships. All of this is considered when setting the tax levy at the township's annual meeting in March, when every citizen can hear what the costs of services are and how this translates to the tax levy, or the amount they will pay as part of their local property tax assessment the next year. It is every citizen's 'duty' to attend this meeting and be part of the decision-making process.

Rural fire departments face several challenges in protecting the people they represent. Much of the nation's fire service is made up of small rural fire departments that are manned by volunteers. Finding people who are willing to volunteer in our busy world is challenging. Funding is also an issue. Fire departments are often funded only by local property tax. In areas that are less populated or with lower property values, not much money is generated to keep up with the cost of equipment and technology. Adequate training is another significant challenge. Volunteers must have time for, and access to, advanced training. These are all obstacles fire departments must overcome to keep us safe.

Two-and-a-half centuries ago, our ancestors wrote the framework for the laws and principles that all units of government follow, including the 'first duty' of protection. In the words of Thomas Jefferson, 'The chief purpose of government is to protect life. Abandon that, and you have abandoned all.' We are fortunate that our local government has not abandoned us!