

**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?**

15-29 Lauren Allis ~ Walnut Lake Township ~ Faribault County

June 16, 2014, 6:15 pm, a storm begins brewing north of our farm. We watch out our picture window as the clouds begin to swirl. My dad advises us to head to the basement. Within minutes of making it to the basement, we hear the wrath of the storm. We wait for the calm after the storm and make our way out of the basement. We begin to assess the damages and discover that we have suffered a severe loss of trees, but more devastating, it the loss of our 100 year old barn. We begin the daunting task of clearing the driveway of the fallen trees in order to make it more passable. As we stand there, overwhelmed by the task ahead of us, we hear voices making their way through our yard. We look up and see members of our local fire department. I am touched by their quick response and genuine concern for our safety. We are so fortunate to live in a country and have access to such an essential service.

There are different ways in which fire protection may be provided by townships. In larger, metro area townships, it is possible that the township has their own fire department. In our smaller, rural townships, fire protection is typically provided through a contract with a neighboring city. In the case of our township, they have negotiated a contract with two neighboring cities. Each contract identifies their service territory (which sections they cover within the township), the length of time the contract is effective (1 year, 3 years, etc.), as well as the financial terms of the contract. In the case of our township, the fire department bills them annually based on the number of fire calls within their respective service territory.

Fire service is usually the largest expenditure for many townships. Townships usually cover the cost of fire service contracts by using local property taxes (the largest source of township revenue). Some townships will implement a service charge for emergency services to help cover the cost of the fire contracts.

A city will normally bill the township annually for fire service. When the township holds their annual meeting the second Tuesday in March, they approve payment of the fire contract bill, and oftentimes use this meeting to adopt a new contract if the old contract is scheduled to expire. The annual meeting is also an opportune time for the local fire department to share information with the township on topics such as equipment needs and recruitment efforts.

Recruiting members to volunteer fire departments is a real challenge for many small city fire departments. The members of our local fire department are people that I see in church on Sunday or at a local sporting event. They give up time with their families, holiday gatherings, and take time off from their jobs to provide this important public safety function. We are so fortunate to have people who are so willing to give their time to ensure our safety.