

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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Brad Henry, former Governor of Oklahoma, once said, "A fundamental duty of government is to protect its people." This is an important responsibility for not only state, county and city government, but also rural township government.

There are several categories of public safety in which township government is tasked with providing safety to the residents of the townships in which they serve. These include maintenance to public property, along with police and fire services. Small townships generally provide police and fire services through a partnership with nearby towns or cities. With a total of 1,788 townships in Minnesota (2007 Minnesota Association of Townships), the need for partnerships across communities, or cooperative between townships, becomes very important.

While most townships have their own road maintenance equipment to care for the mostly gravel roads within the township, and county or city provide law enforcement, fire protection often depends on a volunteer fire department. In many cases, a fire department is contracted with the township to provide fire protection and first responder services. What this means is that if someone within the township has a fire, the contracted fire department would respond after being paged. These fire protection and medical services are typically provided at no additional charge to the individual in-need.

A township resident is generally not directly charged for these fire protection services as the township carries the financial cost for contracting with the fire department. Although this contract can be set up different ways between the township and city, an agreement that I am familiar with is determined by the fire department tallying the number of calls received for the past year, broken out by township. They average the calls and charge the township on a percentage formula. The fire contracts are then reviewed for renewal on an annual basis. This review is done at the township annual meeting the second Tuesday in March MS § 365.51. If the meeting is cancelled for weather reasons, it is rescheduled to the third Tuesday.

There are several challenges in providing these services to townships that the fire department face. The biggest challenge is their ability to purchase equipment due to the cost. There are programs available, such as the Minnesota DNR rural fire department program which provides assistance to fire departments by providing or subsidizing equipment and grants, but programs do not cover all of the cost.

The other part of public safety mentioned earlier, is that of maintenance to public property. This is an important aspect to the fire department's ability to provide services to the residents of the townships. It is the township's responsibility to ensure accessibility to the areas they serve through maintenance of the roads.

Public safety is the responsibility of each individual township, but as budgets are often tight and contracted services required, the relationships with neighboring towns and cities is very important. Township officials are providing an important service to all of rural Minnesota. Not always an easy job, but I believe a fulfilling one.