

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?

15-113 Jessica Stone ~ Cloquet ~ Carlton County

Growing up outdoors as a small-town Minnesota country girl, I cannot help but admire our state's vast fields, rolling hills, and towering forests. Minnesota offers calm, peaceful communities away from the bustling city; it is no secret why its rural countryside attracts many, including me. It is only here that I can imagine call 'Home.'

However, Minnesota's rural communities also have their own set of challenges; rural fire protection is one example. As 'A Township's Highest Obligation,' public safety, which includes fire safety, is a primary responsibility of township officials. The need for rural fire protection is indisputable; however, the inner workings and operations behind the services are uncommon knowledge to many. Often, the hard work townships officials devote to overcoming these challenges is overlooked or forgotten.

The process begins with a selection of a fire protection provider. Minnesota townships may offer fire protection in many ways; these include an organized municipal fire department, a contract for fire protection from a neighboring town, a formed Joint Powers Fire Protection District with one or more other towns, or a private corporation called a Rural Fire Association. Of these choices, each township must select the department that would benefit it most, taking into consideration location, costs, availability, and ability based on equipment and number of members.

Subsequent to choosing its fire protection provider, the township's overall budget, which includes the cost of fire protection, is voted on by its residents during the annual Township Day meeting, held on the second Tuesday in March. The cost agreed upon is later collected through a levy as part of the property taxes, which includes fire protection, road maintenance, snow plowing, and more.

Although the process may sound simple, after contacting numerous townships, I have found that they face many common challenges related to fire protection. The first involves the search for a fire protection provider who is nearby to ensure response time and insurance costs are kept to a minimum, but also cost effective, available 24/7, and properly prepared with enough equipment and firefighters to go at any moment. Many township board members stressed the difficulty of finding a provider with all of these traits. Often, townships are forced to compromise, resulting in lacking accommodations in specific areas.

Another challenge township fire departments commonly face concerns the limited amount of fire mains in rural areas. This plight leaves trucks without a water source to tap into while fighting fires. Some departments have combated this through the purchase of a 'sucker' truck to gather water from nearby ponds, rivers or streams. However, costs prevent many others from doing so.

All in all, although rural Minnesota communities have their disadvantages when it comes to providing public services such as fire safety, townships offer benefits that far outweigh their challenges. By increasing township awareness, new and innovative solutions may be found to help Minnesota townships continue to strive for their highest obligation – public safety – and protect this beautiful land we call 'Home.'