CHAPTER TWO
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

General organizational aspects of fire services delivery are reviewed in this Chapter and fire service organization in the Township of Lower Merion is addressed to include legal authority and the current structure of the various component organizations. Observations, conclusions and recommendations are outlined for consideration by the Township and the Lower Merion Fire Department and its member volunteer fire companies.

OVERVIEW

Developing and organizing fire services within a community to provide the most efficient and cost-effective delivery of quality service is one of the most important functions of local government. Historically, many fire agencies were developed and organized on the basis of local neighborhood need and initiative. However, as communities have become increasingly urban, calls for service have increased with a resulting need for increased coordination, consistency, and direction of fire and rescue services and resources.

It is understood that a key fire organizational principle relates to the basic responsibility for public safety within the community. It is widely accepted that fire services provision is considered to be a local government responsibility in most areas of the United States. Local government is broadly interpreted to include municipalities, such as counties, cities, towns, villages, and townships.

In the delivery of optimum fire services, it is considered essential that local government recognize and accept that responsibility and fulfill the obligation to provide appropriate guidance and direction to:

A. Oversee the formation process of the organization of fire services;

B. Ensure that the fire organizations reflect the public interest;

C. Protect the service from undesirable external interference;
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

OVERVIEW (continued)

D. Determine basic policies for providing services; and,

E. Define the legal duties and responsibilities of service providers.

National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Standard

Identification of this authority and responsibility is addressed in Section 3-1 of NFPA 1201, Developing Fire Protection Services for the Public, as follows:

“...the government agency responsible for establishment and operation of the fire department shall adopt a formal statement (bylaw/statute) of purpose and policies for the fire department that includes the type and levels of services that are to be provided, the area to be served, and the delegation of authority to the fire chief and other officers to manage and operate the fire department.”

The remainder of this Chapter addresses current legal authority to organize and operate fire services in the Township of Lower Merion, current organization, and appropriate observations and recommendations.

LEGAL AUTHORITY

By virtue of the fact that it has in excess of 300 residents per square mile, Lower Merion is a Township of the First Class in accordance with Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Township Code. The Township has been a First Class township since 1900: it is the oldest in the state. As such, the Board of Commissioners of Lower Merion Township has the following primary fire services-related authority, pursuant to Article XVIII of the Code:
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

LEGAL AUTHORITY (continued)

Article XVIII: Fire Prevention and Protection

- "...place, replace, operate, maintain and repair or contract with water companies or municipal authorities for the placing, replacing, operating, maintaining and repairing of fire hydrants to water mains, maintaining pressures approved by fire insurance underwriters along highways, streets, roads and alleys within the township or provide for or acquire a water supply system equipped to supply sufficient water for the protection of property from fire."

- "...annually assess the cost of fire protection by an equal assessment upon all property, whether or not exempt from taxation by existing law, within seven hundred and eighty feet of any fire hydrant based upon the assessment of property for county tax purposes."

- "...annually assess the cost of fire protection by an equal assessment on all property..."

- "...pay the cost for fire protection out of the general township fund."

- "...appropriate moneys for the use of the township or to fire companies located in the township for the operation and maintenance of fire companies, for the purchase and maintenance of fire apparatus, for the construction, repair and maintenance of fire company houses, for training of fire company personnel and, as set forth in this section, for fire training schools or centers in order to secure fire protection for the inhabitants of the township. The fire companies shall submit to the board ... an annual report of the use of the appropriated moneys for each completed year of the township before any further payments may be made to the fire companies for the current year."
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

LEGAL AUTHORITY (continued)

- "...by ordinance make rules and regulations for the government of fire
  companies which are located within the township and their officers."

- "...contract with or make grants to near or adjacent municipal corporations or
  volunteer fire companies therein for fire protection in the township."

- Approve by resolution, the establishment or organization of volunteer fire
  companies.

- "...annually appropriate funds to fire companies located within the township
  for the training of its personnel..."

- "...adopt any standard fire prevention code published and printed in book form
  as provided under this act for adopting standard codes."

In summary, as a Township of the First Class in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the
Township of Lower Merion has full authority to establish, organize and pay for the provision
of fire services either directly or through fire companies.

LOWER MERION FIRE DEPARTMENT

In 1908, pursuant to its authority under state law, the Lower Merion Township Board of
Commissioners adopted Chapter 78, Fire Prevention, that includes Article I, Administration
of Fire Department. That section of Township code establishes the Lower Merion Fire
Department (LMFD) and outlines the organization and administration of the fire department.

Fire Committee

The Fire Committee is a standing committee of the Board of Commissioners and includes
an appointed chair and vice chair and the remainder of the full Board of Commissioners. The
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

LOWER MERION FIRE DEPARTMENT (continued)

Study Team was advised that the committee serves as a focus for fire services matters for the Board of Commissioners.

Board of Directors

Article I also established a Board of Directors of the fire department. The board is governed by its bylaws and is responsible to the Fire Committee and the Board of Commissioners. According to the Township Code, the Board of Directors consists of:

- Elected presidents of the volunteer fire companies (seven), or alternates;
- Elected chiefs of the volunteer fire companies (seven), or alternates;
- Chairman of the Fire Committee of the Board of Commissioners;
- Township Manager;
- Chief fire officer; and,
- *Director of public safety/superintendent of police (non-voting).

*Note: Reportedly, the Lower Merion superintendent of police, or designee, attends Board meetings since the position of public safety director was abolished.

The Study Team has conducted planning studies for more than 120 fire departments, involving volunteer fire companies and their members. In all of its previous volunteer-related studies, and having observed the composition of other such boards of directors, the Study Team has not seen a volunteer board with this many members: 14, two from each of the seven fire companies.

In the course of conducting this project, the Study Team was provided a copy of the original ordinance establishing the LMFD and its Board of Directors. In reviewing that original 1908 ordinance, entitled An Ordinance for the Organization of the Fire Department of Lower Merion Township, it is noteworthy that the original LMFD Board of Directors included only one representative from each fire company—the fire company chief.
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

LOWER MERION FIRE DEPARTMENT (continued)

The Board of Directors of the Fire Department is advisory in nature with the responsibility to make recommendations to the chief fire officer and/or Board of Commissioners in such matters as:

- Administration
- Training
- Firefighting methods
- Developing specifications for and ordering of new equipment
- Fire alarm operation (dispatch)
- Fire alarm response
- Other matters pertaining to the management of the Fire Department

Chief Fire Officer

Chapter 78 established the position of chief fire officer (CFO) to be the “chief officer” of the Lower Merion Fire Department with “...the power and responsibility of carrying out the provisions...” of Chapter 78. The chief fire officer answers to the Board of Commissioners through the director of public safety/superintendent of police (a position that no longer exists). Today, the CFO reports to the Township Manager.

The primary responsibilities of the CFO include:

- Serving as the chief officer of the LMFD;
- Receiving and giving careful consideration to all recommendations submitted by the Board of Directors and, when feasible, arranging for the implementation of board recommendations;
- Being in charge of the proper dispatch of apparatus to any fire or emergency;
- Responding to assume command at all alarms and fires to which more than two fire companies respond, if conditions make such action necessary; and,
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

LOWER MERION FIRE DEPARTMENT (continued)

• Overseeing and supervising all fire marshal functions, including the enforcement of all laws, ordinances and regulations with respect to prevention of fires, storage and use of explosives, installation and maintenance of automatic and other fire alarms and fire extinguishing equipment, maintenance and regulation of fire escapes and adequacy of exits, and the investigation of the cause and origin of fires.

FIRE COMPANIES

There are seven member companies of the Lower Merion Fire Department. They include:

• Belmont Hills Fire Company
• Bryn Mawr Fire Company
• Gladwyne Fire Company
• Merion Fire Company of Ardmore
• Penn Wynne-Overbrook Hills Fire Company
• Union Fire Company of Lower Merion
• Narberth Fire Company

Each of the seven fire companies located in Lower Merion was incorporated under the laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, operates under a set of adopted authorizations, including a constitution, bylaws and other rules and/or guidelines, and elects and/or appoints a set of administrative and operational officers pursuant to their bylaws.

Each of the volunteer fire companies receives substantial funds from the Township, and, operationally, are under the command of their respective fire company chiefs, as well as, the chief fire officer, under the guidelines established in Chapter 78.
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

FIRE COMPANIES (continued)

Each of the fire companies originally adopted a constitution and/or bylaws which have been subsequently revised, as considered appropriate by the membership of each company. The constitutions/bylaws of the companies vary.

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 illustrate the organization of the LMFD Office and the LMFD.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF FIRE COMPANIES

A review of the constitution, bylaws and/or official website of the volunteer fire companies indicates that the companies are organized into two primary organizational elements: administration and operations.

Administration

The volunteer fire companies are administered by a number of elected or appointed administrative officers. The administrative officers of each company are listed below:

**Belmont Hills Fire Company**

The administrative (non-operational) component of the Belmont Hills Fire Company organization structure includes the following elected administrative officers:

1. President;
2. Vice president;
3. Recording secretary;
4. Financial secretary; and,
5. Treasurer.
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATION OF FIRE COMPANIES (continued)

Bryn Mawr Fire Company

The administrative (non-operational) component of Bryn Mawr Fire Company organization structure includes the following elected administrative officers:

1. President;
2. Vice president;
3. Secretary;
4. Treasurer; and,
5. Financial secretary.

Gladwyne Fire Company

The administrative (non-operational) component of Gladwyne Fire Company organization includes the following elected administrative officers:

1. President;
2. Vice president/s;
3. Treasurer;
4. Assistant treasurer;
5. Secretary; and,
6. Assistant secretary.

Merion Fire Company of Ardmore

The administrative (non-operational) component of Merion Fire Company of Ardmore organization structure includes the following elected administrative officers:

1. President;
2. Vice president;
3. Secretary; and,
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATION OF FIRE COMPANIES (continued)

4. Treasurer.

Penn Wynne-Overbrook Hills Fire Company

The administrative (non-operational) component of Penn Wynne-Overbrook Hills Fire Company organization structure includes the following elected administrative officers:

1. President;
2. Vice president;
3. Treasurer;
4. Financial secretary; and,
5. Secretary.

Union Fire Association of Lower Merion

The administrative (non-operational) component of Union Fire Association of Lower Merion organization structure includes the following elected administrative officers:

1. President;
2. Vice president;
3. Secretary; and,
4. Treasurer.

Narberth Fire Company

The administrative (non-operational) component of Narberth Fire Company organization structure includes the following elected administrative officers:

1. President;
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATION OF FIRE COMPANIES (continued)

2. Vice president;
3. Secretary;
4. Financial secretary; and
5. Treasurer.

The fire companies include directors that typically provide overall policy and administrative direction to the company.

The administrative officer structure of the seven-member fire companies of the LMFD are very similar and largely consistent with the administrative officer structures of many volunteer fire companies/departments observed across the United States by the Study Team.

Operational Officers

The operational officers of each of the companies include the following ranks of elected or appointed operational officers:

Belmont Hills Fire Company

The Belmont Hills Fire Company operational officers are appointed by the Board of Directors and include:

1. Fire company chief;
2. Deputy chief;
3. First assistant chief;
4. Second assistant chief;
5. Captain;
6. Lieutenant; and,
7. Engineer and assistant engineers.
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ORGANIZATION OF FIRE COMPANIES (continued)

Bryn Mawr Fire Company

The Bryn Mawr Fire Company elected operational officers includes:

1. Fire company chief;
2. Deputy chief;
3. First assistant chief;
4. Second assistant fire chief; and,
5. Third assistant fire chief.

Gladwyne Fire Company

The Gladwyne Fire Company elected operational officers include:

1. Fire company chief;
2. Deputy fire chief;
3. Assistant chief/s;
4. Captain/s; and/or,
5. Lieutenant/s.

Merion Fire Company of Ardmore

The Merion Fire Company of Ardmore operational officers include:

1. Fire company chief;
2. Deputy chief;
3. First assistant fire chief;
4. Second assistant chief;
5. Third assistant chief; and,
6. Fourth assistant chief.
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATION OF FIRE COMPANIES (continued)

Penn Wynne-Overbrook Hills Fire Company

The Penn Wynne-Overbrook Hills Fire Company elected operational officers include:

1. Fire company chief;
2. Deputy fire chief;
3. First assistant chief;
4. Second assistant chief;
5. Third assistant chief; and,
6. Junior officer (appointed by the fire chief).

Union Fire Association of Lower Merion

The Union Fire Association of Lower Merion operational officers include:

1. Fire company chief;
2. Deputy chief;
3. Assistant chief;
4. Captain; and,
5. Lieutenants (2)—vacant at the time of the Study.

Narberth Fire Company

The Narberth Fire Company operational officers include:

1. Fire company chief;
2. Deputy chief;
3. First assistant fire chief;
4. Second assistant fire chief;
5. Third assistant fire chief;
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATION OF FIRE COMPANIES (continued)

6. Fourth assistant fire chief; and,
7. Other junior officers as determined by the fire company chief.

It should be noted that engineers may or may not be listed as “officers” in fire companies, dependent upon each company’s practice.

It is noteworthy that a number of Lower Merion fire companies have very unique operational officer structures. Only two fire companies, Gladwyne Fire Company and Union Fire Association of Lower Merion, elect or appoint one or more junior (non-chief) officers: one or more captain and/or one or more lieutenant. In the experience of the Study Team, this is highly unusual in the fire services of the United States, whether paid, combination paid/volunteer or all volunteer.

Typically, fire services organizations utilize the junior operational officer ranks (e.g., captain, lieutenant and/or sergeant) as unit officers for apparatus, with limited overall incident command responsibility. These positions are typically used for the operational development of personnel that may lead to an eventual command (chief rank) officer position. For a fire company to have only chief-titled operational officers, with members going from firefighter to chief officer overnight based on election or appointment, seems dysfunctional to the Study Team. Utilizing the lower ranked chief officer positions (assistant chiefs) for developmental purposes is a highly unusual practice, even in Montgomery County, PA.

FIREFIGHTERS’ RELIEF ASSOCIATIONS

Firefighters’ relief associations have been established by statute in a number of states across the nation. Typically, volunteer firefighters’ relief associations are created to provide ancillary benefits to volunteer firefighters that are similar in benefits routinely paid by municipal fire departments. Such benefits may include disability and accident insurance, life insurance and pensions. In addition, these organizations often purchase safety-related fire equipment and supplies for the fire department.
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

FIREFIGHTERS’ RELIEF ASSOCIATION (continued)

In Pennsylvania, firefighters’ relief associations are governed by the Volunteer Firemen’s Relief Association Act, commonly referred to as Act 84. The act establishes criteria and standards to ensure that funds are available for the protection of volunteer firefighters and their families. The Municipal Pension Plan Funding Standard and Recovery Act, No. 205, P.L. 1005 (Act 205), provides for a tax on foreign fire insurance premiums to fund the activities of relief associations in Pennsylvania.

A volunteer firefighters’ relief association is defined as an organization formed primarily for the purpose of affording financial protection to volunteer firefighters against the consequences of misfortune suffered as a result of their participation in the fire service. The purpose of the statute is to encourage individuals to take part in the fire service as volunteer firefighters. Funds are made available for the following purposes:

- To provide financial assistance to volunteer firefighters who may suffer injury or misfortune by reason of their participation in the fire service;

- To provide financial assistance to the spouse, children or other dependents of volunteer firefighters who die as a result of their participation in the fire service;

- To provide, either by insurance or by the operation of a beneficial fund, for the payment of a sum certain to the designated beneficiaries of a participating member in such fund, following the death of such member for any cause, and to establish criteria which members must meet in order to qualify as participants in such a death benefit fund;

- To provide safeguards for preserving life, health and safety of volunteer firefighters;
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

FIREFIGHTERS' RELIEF ASSOCIATION (continued)

- To provide financial assistance to volunteer firefighters who, after having actively participated in the fire service for a specified minimum term, are no longer physically able to continue such participation and are in need of financial assistance;

- To provide funds to aid the rehabilitation of volunteer firefighters who have suffered an impairment of their physical capacity to continue to perform their normal occupations; and,

- To provide sufficient funds to ensure the efficient and economical handling of the business of the association in accomplishing its objectives.

Each relief association has fiduciary responsibility to the state, the taxpayers and the firefighters and their beneficiaries, to comply within the statutory scheme. Each relief association receives the bulk of its support through municipal and state funding. Relief associations are also audited yearly by the state auditor or by local independent auditors, under procedures and requirements established by the state auditor. Copies of all audits are furnished to the governor. If a volunteer firefighters' relief association has used funds for any purpose other than those authorized by Act 84, the state may decline to approve any further payments and request reimbursement of an amount equal to that improperly spent by the association.

The complex statutory scheme governing the creation and operation of firefighter relief organizations in Pennsylvania demonstrates the state's acknowledgment of its responsibility to provide the specified relief benefits. By providing the funding for such benefits, the state achieves its goal of encouraging individuals to become volunteer firefighters, thus ensuring a quality fire service without the direct investment of operating municipal fire departments. By administering the funds, relief associations reduce the burden on government by fulfilling the state's obligation to provide such benefits.
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

FIREFIGHTERS’ RELIEF ASSOCIATION (continued)

The Study Team was advised that there are currently two volunteer firefighters’ relief associations functioning in Lower Merion fire services: the Township of Lower Merion Volunteer Firefighters’ Relief Association and the Borough of Narberth Volunteer Firefighters’ Relief Association.

At this time, the foreign fire insurance state aid is distributed to each municipality served by volunteer firefighters. In Lower Merion, those funds are distributed by the state to the Township of Lower Merion and the Borough of Narberth. The state-collected funds are then reportedly distributed to the appropriate relief association for use in accordance with applicable Commonwealth law, Act 84.

In accordance with state law, the Department of the Auditor General conducted an audit of the Township of Lower Merion Volunteer Firefighters’ Relief Association for the period of January 1, 2003 through December 31, 2004. By letter dated November 20, 2006, the results of that audit were transmitted to the treasurer of the Lower Merion Volunteer Firefighters’ Relief Association.

During the time period covered by the audit, relief association disbursements in the amount of $735,000 had been made in four categories, including:

- Fire services: equipment purchased and maintained, and training expenses;
- Benefits services: insurance premiums, death benefits and relief benefits;
- Administrative services: office equipment and supplies, brokerage service fees, stipends and rental expenses; and,
- Other disbursements: investments purchased and income reinvested.

This most recent audit indicated that, as of December 31, 2004, the Lower Merion Relief Association’s monetary assets were $685,026, which included cash totaling $74,073 and total investments of $610,953, with a fair market value of $612,768. The audit noted one reportable condition of noncompliance, which was continuing noncompliance with a prior
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

FIREFIGHTERS’ RELIEF ASSOCIATION (continued)

audit recommendation identifying inadequate relief association bylaws. Specifically, the existing bylaws did not address the requirement for the dispersing officer to be bonded by corporate surety.

ORGANIZATIONAL OBSERVATIONS

The following sections address the Study Team’s general observations about the organization of the Lower Merion fire and rescue services from a fire company and Township-wide perspective.

Individual Company Perspective

The fire companies were organized under state chartered certificates of incorporation, as are many volunteer fire companies across the nation. They are governed internally by constitution and/or bylaws that the membership has adopted and modified. Each department also operates under policies and/or procedures approved by either their fire company chief, president and/or governing board. These policies vary significantly in terms of quality, detail and currency.

The charter, bylaws and policies of each of the combination fire companies generally focus internally on its organization, structure and operation. They typically do not relate to the other company, the overall township fire and rescue services, or the LMFD.

Operationally, the fire and rescue companies appear to focus their service needs assessments, decision making, strategies for staffing, and apparatus and equipment requirements on their own first due response area. They often attempt to provide all necessary services to the response area without full regard for resources available from surrounding fire and rescue companies. Each appears to focus on its own response area and attempts to provide the full range of services considered necessary without regard to the capability of the whole fire service in the Township.
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL OBSERVATIONS (continued)

The operational chain of command within each of the fire companies is very similar, generally consisting of a fire company chief, a deputy fire chief and a number of assistant fire chiefs. Five fire companies have only chief officers in their operational chain of command while two fire companies have one or more captains and/or lieutenants. All fire companies have firefighters as their lowest rank in the chain of command. All operational officers are volunteer members. There are 20 full-time firefighters employed in the seven fire stations and no paid officers. There are three firefighters employed by each fire company, except for the Narberth Fire Company that utilizes two paid firefighters.

In summary, the fire companies continue to appear to be very parochial in nature.

Township-wide Perspective

For nearly 100 years, the Township code has stated that there is a Lower Merion Fire Department with a number (now seven) of member fire companies. It appears that LMFD exists, in essence, in name only. In actual practice, the Township of Lower Merion is being served by seven fire companies, operating with seven autonomous approaches to following important aspects of the fire and rescue service management:

1. Chain of command
2. Budgeting and accounting for tax funds
3. Operational policies and procedures
4. Apparatus and personnel utilization on emergency incidents
5. Public fire education
6. Officer promotion requirements
7. Training requirements
8. Firefighter supervision and discipline
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL OBSERVATIONS (continued)

9. Payroll processing
10. Station staffing
11. Apparatus staffing
12. Apparatus maintenance
13. Services provided
14. Accountability for actions and the quality of services rendered
15. Service expansion/improvement planning
16. Safety of personnel

In summary, rather than a one-team approach, there are eight fire and rescue service teams (seven fire companies and the officers and staff of the LMFD) in the Township of Lower Merion. Each of the seven fire company teams focuses on their own organization and response area while the Township’s fire staff attempts to bring about a team effort, with little success to date. Each fire company seems to attempt to exert its perceived sole authority in its district of the Township, attempts to provide as full a range of services individually as possible and attempts to ignore the fact that there is supposed to be one fire services organization (LMFD) with an appointed fire chief and deputy fire chief officer.

There is a reason why the fire companies and their individual leaders are referred to (and at times refer to themselves) as the “seven kings and seven kingdoms.” They seem to take every opportunity to deny the existence of the LMFD and the fact that they are part of a whole organization—unless they are in need of tax funds, new fire apparatus, a new fire station or renovation of their old facility.

As with most communities across the nation, the Township of Lower Merion and its fire services are having to deal with limited resources. In addition, the fire and rescue companies
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL OBSERVATIONS (continued)

are having difficulty recruiting and retaining members to serve as volunteer firefighting personnel. This same difficulty appears to be a problem being experienced by many volunteer fire organizations nationwide.

The effort most fire companies expend to provide as many services as possible further strains limited resources and places unnecessary financial demands on the community for taxes and donation funds.

In addition, although the Township fire staff make the effort, no entity in the Township fire services is viewing the services as a whole and ensuring that the decisions made and the actions taken are in the best interests of all of the Township. This is not to say that there is not a desire on the part of many in the Township of Lower Merion fire services to provide consistently high quality service to the public. The Study Team noted many individual efforts at different levels focused on trying to develop a cohesive team. Further, although the LMFD has a Board of Directors, the predominance of the members of this board (14 out of 17 members) are representatives of the seven fire companies and seem to maintain the parochial fire company perspective rather than that of the entire Township.

An organizational framework to facilitate the redevelopment of a team approach to the provision of fire services in the Township of Lower Merion does not require the establishment of a paid-staff fire department and the depopulation of the volunteer organizations. A single fire department was created in 1908, made up of the fire companies and Township fire staff. However, this organization, with multiple semi-autonomous components (the fire companies) intended to function as a single, cohesive service-delivery agency with paid and volunteer staff members, seems to be dysfunctional and failing to work as a unit. Many of those involved seem to have lost focus on the fact that there is strength through cooperation.
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES

This section outlines indicators of the need for organizational and management change in the Township of Lower Merion and possible alternatives for consideration.

Indicators of Need for Change

There are many factors that are influencing fire companies to reassess their organization and management. This is occurring nationally, in the state and in the Township of Lower Merion, and is true whether the company is staffed by all volunteers, a combination of paid and volunteer staff, or all paid personnel. Key influencing factors include:

A. Changing economic conditions in the service area;

B. Increasing number and complexity of federal and state safety and related regulations and ordinances;

C. Social and political factors;

D. Changing community demographics;

E. Technological factors;

F. Changing customer service expectations; and,
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES (continued)

G. Changes in service demands and expectations resulting from 9/11 and the increasing requirements for more cooperation and integrated response.

These and other factors are constantly applying pressure and stressing the manner in which the fire services have traditionally been organized and managed.

Input from Firefighters and Officers

During the interview/survey process, the Study Team elicited comments from officials, firefighters, and officers in the fire companies and the LMFD on the subject of the organization and administration of the fire protection service in the Township of Lower Merion. These individuals were asked their opinion on the major problem areas and ways to improve the organization of the Township of Lower Merion fire and rescue services. Some of the responses provided are as follows:

1. The independence of some fire companies has thwarted any real attempts to unify the department; seven fire companies operate more independently than cohesively.

2. Better service could be provided with an improved group effort; we could all do a better job as a department.

3. Everyone has their own way, even the Township.

4. We should establish a more joint organization to have a better chance of helping this community as a whole.

5. The fire service in the Township needs to move away from what has been dubbed seven kings, seven kingdoms.

6. Significant differences in staffing levels and standards among the companies.
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES (continued)

7. We lack common training standards, operating procedures and synergy.

8. The goal of the fire department needs to be a grass roots movement to improve and standardize.

9. There needs to be better interoperability between fire companies.

10. Each fire company has varied levels of training requirements.

11. Apparatus staffing is at dangerously low levels with apparatus many times leaving the fire station with only one or two firefighters.

12. Some fire companies could not care less about training and certifications.

13. The closest fire, rescue, and/or ambulance unit is not always dispatched on emergency incidents.

14. Apparent reduction in active volunteer personnel in the fire companies.

15. Increasing amount of time and effort required by the volunteer leadership to manage the administrative and fund-raising activities of the companies.

16. Excessive number and duplication of types of apparatus.

17. There is a need for the establishment and compliance with policies and standards.

18. There is a need for consistent operational procedures among the fire companies.

19. There is a need for consistent training and other programs provided by the fire companies.

20. There is no joint official operational chain of command for the service.

21. The fire companies should cooperate more efficiently.

22. The notion that this is our fire is outdated, counterproductive and sometimes dangerous.

23. There is an extreme disparity in levels of training among the fire companies.
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES (continued)

24. There is poor Township-wide planning regarding equipment purchases and use.

25. There should be more uniform operations, not each company on its own.

26. There is a need for more interaction between the fire companies for improved equipment and operations familiarization for improved operations.

27. There is too much separation, i.e., many different fire companies.

28. Formal training should be a Township function reinforced by regular station drills.

29. There are few enforced guidelines for control and accountability.

30. There are poor lines of communications between the fire department office and the individual fire companies.

31. There is a need to better utilize the paid staff members of the fire companies.

32. The paid firefighters need to be better paid; today they make less than the Township trash collectors.

33. Existing resources are not always utilized to maximum efficiency.

34. There is a problem with unqualified personnel commanding incidents.

35. Cooperation is required for effective use of personnel and equipment.

36. The majority of the response load is being carried by a very few dedicated volunteers.

37. Administrative functions should be streamlined so that more time and resources could be used for fire and rescue protection and training.

38. There is too much fault-finding and bickering.

39. The Township should assume employment of the paid firefighters.

40. The fire companies would benefit from full cooperation.

41. There is a lack of minimum training standards for the officers.
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES (continued)

42. There is too much fire apparatus in the Township; seven ladder trucks in a 23 square mile area are too much.

43. The us versus them attitude is counterproductive.

44. There is a need for more paid staffing during the daytime when most volunteers are unavailable.

45. There is a lack of respect shown by fire company personnel toward the Township’s chief.

46. There are significant differences in the level of fire and rescue services provided to citizens of the Township of Lower Merion, depending on geographic location and time of day and day of week.

47. There needs to be recognition of the need for change, as stated by firefighters and officers.

These excerpts, from comments addressing the organization and management issues and concerns relating to the Lower Merion Fire Department and its fire companies, were provided to the Study Team through interviews and surveys of more than 250 officials, volunteer officers, and paid and volunteer firefighters. A majority of the problem areas and suggestions for improvement outlined in this list were provided to the Study Team by the officers and senior members of the fire companies.

There are widely differing opinions regarding the need or lack of need for change in the organization and management of the Township fire services. It is true that change is a controversial and sensitive issue. Also, there are widely diverse opinions on the nature of the change that may be needed. There are those who suggest that no change is needed; and at the other end of the spectrum, there are those who believe there should be more central oversight and control in providing service in the Township of Lower Merion.
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES (continued)

Although there are a number of fire company personnel and leaders who remain very traditional and parochial in their views, there was a clear indication, in the written and verbal feedback to the Study Team, of the recognition on the part of many fire company members of the need to change course and deal with the current systemic weaknesses. Indications of the need for more of a team approach in the delivery of fire and rescue services by the Township fire agency were also noted.

The Study Team recognized that a large number of officers and firefighters seemed to acknowledge a need to consider changing. This change should facilitate and encourage improved service, allow more cost-effective delivery, improve supervision, and enhance benefits for the dedicated volunteer members and paid staff in the fire companies.

The Study Team was impressed with the quantity and quality of the responses from a substantial number of respondents to the confidential member survey that provided the members of the fire companies with a means to provide feedback in a number of areas related to this master planning effort. A number of member responses were particularly detailed and insightful. The following are excerpts of detailed responses from two fire company officers whose survey responses seem to summarize the thoughts of many fire company members.

First Officer Survey Response

"The Lower Merion Fire Department as it is today is bordering on dysfunctional. While certain fire companies have very dedicated and competent leaders and firefighters, others do not and with 6 fire companies operating on their own, it is hurting the organization as a whole."
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES (continued)

“The problem as I see it is the department, as a whole, is operating under a very old Commonwealth of PA model in which each individual company is an autonomous organization that does as it pleases with little or no connection to the other 5 fire companies. As the number of volunteers has decreased over the last 20 years, the ‘department’ has continued with the same operational background. Thus people who have very little experience, education and training become officers and chiefs, and the organization motto seems to be ‘that is how we have always done it’. Instead of working as one true department, the ‘department’ operates as 6 little fiefdoms which, in some cases, struggle to provide the most basic of fire protection to the citizens of the community.

“Money is wasted on apparatus that is unneeded; why do we need 6 ladder trucks, 2 rescues and 2 squads? Companies have apparatus fleets that they struggle to man but they continue to request/purchase more equipment. There is very little coordination on the purchase of equipment on them and I fear if hose thread was not standardized, we would have trucks in the department which could not be connected together.

“I truly believe that the ‘department’ could be a great department if the focus was to operate as one Department with 6 stations and not 6 companies operating in one ‘department’. There needs to be one standard department for officers qualifications, training requirements, one set of Standard Operating Procedures, a standard for the purchase of all apparatus and fire fighting equipment, so that with the exception of fire truck colors and names, every truck would be exactly the same.

“The focus of the Township Fire Department office must be primarily that of fire prevention through building inspections and enforcement of the fire code and Life Safety Code. Secondarily, the FD must work to coordinate the development and integration of the department as a whole. This means working to develop SOPs,
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES (continued)

officer qualifications, and training programs which bring all firefighters in the
township to a par level."

Second Officer Survey Response

"There is no 'Lower Merion Fire Department.' There are seven independent fire
companies who, by necessity work together in various types of incidents. In my
opinion, there is nothing wrong with (it may even be desirable) a strong sense of
esprit d' corps concerning one's own station. However, the independence of some
stations has thwarted any real attempts to unify the 'Department.'

"There is a Township S.O.P. on 'upgrading,' or requesting additional assistance on
a reported structure fire. This is a very reasonable and prudent procedure. However,
time after time, some companies do not upgrade, or wait until dangerously late in an
incident to upgrade. I blame this problem entirely on attitudes fostered by the
organizational culture of some stations. The notion that this is 'our fire,' is outdated,
counterproductive and sometimes dangerous.

"This same organizational chauvinism sometimes results in the first due company
(incident commander) recalling units from an assist company even as they approach
the incident (scene) while units from the first due company are still miles away, and
still responding at emergency speed. This presents a significant hazard to both
firefighters and the public. It seems that this attitude makes it virtually impossible to
routinely have units from two stations operating together, unless the incident is of
considerable magnitude."
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES (continued)

There appears to be ample justification for the Township of Lower Merion to consider a further step in the evolution of the organization of the fire service. A quote from a book entitled Fire Department Management: Scope and Method, written by a nationally recognized fire chief and past president of the International Association of Fire Chiefs, David B. Gratz, applies at this point. Chief Gratz stated:

"An organization is not unlike a piece of fire apparatus, in that it has a limited life. Periodic replacement of fire apparatus has long been recognized as good management procedure. When apparatus begins to wear out it requires an increasing number of repairs, and it becomes less safe and efficient in its operations. The replacement of fire apparatus has become routine and in most fire and ambulance companies automatic, based on a predetermined replacement schedule. Unfortunately, there is no predetermined point at which an organization should be modified or replaced, because they wear out. As they gradually become less efficient, fire department management (and municipal officials) must recognize the need for periodic overhaul, or even complete replacement."

Chief Gratz discusses the fact that the "large majority of fire and ambulance companies in America had their beginning as volunteer organizations, with no paid or career firemen." "As a community begins to grow, the need for fire protection will undoubtedly increase. A greater incidence of alarms places new burdens on a volunteer organization, and invariably the need for change becomes evident. How well the adjustment can be made depends upon how well management has planned." Chief Gratz notes six distinct stages of fire protection transitional development (see Figure 2.3).
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES (continued)

Through recent years, the Township of Lower Merion officials, citizens, and the fire services may have discussed various alternatives to further improvement. On this transitional continuum, the fire companies are between the “all volunteer” stage and the “combination paid and volunteer” staffing stages.

Neither Chief Gratz nor the Study Team is implying that the fire companies will eventually transition through all stages or will become paid fire companies. The illustration is presented to simply outline the natural stages in fire company organizational development and the fact that the Township of Lower Merion fire services have been or are discussing transitioning through these stages. This illustration is also presented to emphasize the importance of understanding, planning and managing the transition through these stages. How well this transition process is managed determines whether the fire services proceed through this process effectively.

Potential Organization Enhancements

Based on input from Lower Merion fire services providers and the experiences of the Study Team, serious consideration should be given to organizational evolution. There are a number of different approaches or options to the organization of a municipality’s multiple volunteer and paid fire services, including:

A. Appointment of an administrator or chief with partial or overall administrative and/or operational control;

B. Establishment of appropriate memorandum of agreement between the Township and each member fire company to prescribe the funding and other
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES (continued)

financial support, roles and responsibilities of the fire companies in relation to
the Township and the fire department overall;

C. Creation of a policy-making oversight board;

D. Creation of one organization structure, with a central chain of command, with
the existing multiple companies as an integral part, similar to a number of
large combination paid/volunteer services; and,

E. Creation of one fire organization to provide all services (typically a paid
department).

To strengthen the current Lower Merion fire protection service that already has an appointed
chief, options B and C above seem to be the best alternative steps for the realignment of the
Township of Lower Merion fire and rescue services. The following sections address these
alternatives.

Township-wide Focus

An alternative that may be considered by the Township of Lower Merion could involve
restructuring the current Board of Directors, with a redefined membership and a broad
Township-wide policy-making and oversight role.
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES (continued)

Emergency Services Board

This option would envision a new 15 voting member Emergency Services Board (ESB), as a re-alignment of the current Board of Directors of the LMFD. The ESB would recommend, to the Township of Lower Merion Board of Commissioners and the chief fire officer, the establishment of appropriate Township-wide policies and procedures, and generally oversee the LMFD and the Township of Lower Merion fire and EMS service, as approved by Township Board of Commissioners and/or the chief fire officer (within the CFO’s areas of responsibility under Township code).

The opportunity for the success of this board would be enhanced if there is a combination of service provider, customer and Township commission member represented among the appointed members. The major services of fire should have equal representation. The following is the suggested membership of an Emergency Services Board:

A. Chair of the Board of Commissioner’s Fire Committee, to serve as the chair of the ESB;
B. Fire company chief of each of the member fire companies (seven);
C. Chief of the Narberth Ambulance;
D. Community leader/stakeholders, non-fire company members (three) selected/appointed by the Board of Commissioners;
E. Lower Merion Township Manager;
F. LMFD chief fire officer;
G. Fire prevention division head (recommended as deputy fire marshal); and,
H. Superintendent of police (as non-voting member).
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES (continued)

It is suggested that the chairperson of the Board of Commissioners Fire Committee serve as chair of the Emergency Services Board. The ESB could annually elect from its membership a vice chair and secretary. The members of the Emergency Services Board, appointed by the Board of Commissioners, would serve three-year alternating terms and would be confirmed/appointed by the Township Board of Commissioners, as are most other appointive council boards and commissions. It is envisioned that the chief fire officer and LMFD office staff would provide the support and administrative functions for the ESB.

With this organizational realignment option, the Emergency Services Board could have the following Township-wide duties and responsibilities:

A. Advise the Township of Lower Merion Board of Commissioners and chief fire officer on any matter relating to fire, rescue and EMS services;

B. Recommend to the Township Board of Commissioners and chief fire officer the adoption of appropriate policies, procedures, standards, and plans that would be applicable and binding to all the Township of Lower Merion, including:

1. Volunteer recruitment, retention and promotion programs and policies for members of the fire and ambulance companies,
2. Paid staffing,
3. Integrated operational chain of command,
4. Budget, accounting and auditing policies and procedures,
5. Purchasing policies and procedures,
6. Standard operating procedures;
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES (continued)

C. Establish such committees and task forces deemed appropriate to develop and implement Township fire programs, including, apparatus committee, finance committee, standard operating procedures, training, safety, paid fire staffing, communications and volunteer recruitment and retention;

D. Establish communications and dispatch policies and procedures to be followed by the emergency dispatch center for the Township fire and rescue service;

E. Establish requirements, guidelines, curriculum and programs for training of fire and rescue personnel;

F. Review and recommend that the Township Board of Commissioners approve the annual operating and capital budget submissions for the fire and rescue services as part of the Township’s budget process;

G. Establish fire station response areas based on mileage or travel time projections;

H. Establish a Township-wide consistent rank structure among the member fire companies and the other divisions of the LMFD;

I. Assist the Township Board of Commissioners in assuring that a strategic or service plan is updated at regular intervals; and,

J. Such other duties and responsibilities as assigned by the Township Board of Commissioners.
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES (continued)

Memorandum of Agreement

There appear to be a number of aspects of the role of the fire companies in the Lower Merion Fire Department that indicate a need for more clarity. There seems to be a need to bring about a closer, more clearly understood and accepted (by a number of fire companies) organizational involvement of the fire companies as key components of the department. This concept was originally established in 1908 and again when the LMFD was established by Township code.

The need for an improved, more clearly understood and accepted organizational relationship between the Township and the member fire companies has become more important. The Township and taxpayers have assumed a more substantial role in the financial support of the fire companies, due apparently to the inability of a number of fire companies to financially support themselves.

It has been the observation of the Study Team that memoranda of agreement between municipalities and volunteer fire agencies has become an increasingly accepted and utilized tool to assure the volunteer agencies of future financial support. These agreements also serve to formalize the commitment to service provision by the volunteer fire agency to the community in return for the substantial taxpayer financial support. On an increasing basis, municipalities in the Commonwealth have utilized this tool, including Upper Merion Township.

Such a memorandum of agreement between the Township of Lower Merion and the seven fire companies that form the Lower Merion Fire Department could include the following types of provisions:
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES (continued)

A. The nature of the financial support to be provided by the Township to each fire company for support of paid staffing, operations, fire station maintenance and fire apparatus;

B. The role of the fire company chief as a member of an Emergency Services Board;

C. The commitment of the fire company to provide volunteer officers that meet established training and experience requirements in accordance with established LMFD SOPs;

D. The commitment of the fire company to respond to emergency and non-emergency incidents on behalf of the Township in accordance with established LMFD SOPs;

E. The commitment to appoint operational officers in a rank structure consistent with LMFD SOPs;

F. The agreement of the fire company to submit an annual budget in accordance with the Township and Emergency Services Board policies and procedures;

G. The fire company agrees to the examination, audit or inspection of all, or any portion of, fire company business records;
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

ORGANIZATIONAL ALTERNATIVES (continued)

H. The commitment of the fire company to provide fire and rescue services in accordance with established LMFD and Township policies and procedures; and,

I. The Township appropriation of funds and the disbursement of those funds to the fire company is contingent on continued compliance with established policies and procedures.

A suggested model memorandum of agreement is attached as Appendix A for consideration by the Township.

Crucial Point in History

The Township of Lower Merion fire and rescue companies may very well be at a crucial point in their collective history. A number of the volunteer components of the fire and rescue companies have attempted to retain full control and power, despite the provisions of Township code that clearly establish the Lower Merion Fire Department with the fire companies as component members. The increased workload, continued growth and development of the service area, the apparent reduction in the number of volunteer staff and the potential future need for additional paid staffing in the fire stations, which will be discussed later in this Study, point toward the need to consider change in the organization.

Therefore, the Study Team suggests that the Township of Lower Merion Board of Commissioners consider options available for organizational change, and plan and implement needed improvements, as appropriate.

Figure 2.4 illustrates the proposed Lower Merion Fire Department organization.
PROPOSED LOWER MERION
FIRE DEPARTMENT
ORGANIZATION
CHART

Township Board of Commissioners

Emergency Services Board

Township Manager

Chief Fire Officer/Fire Marshal

Deputy Chief Fire Officer

Office Secretary

Fire Prevention
- Deputy Fire Marshals
- Fire Inspectors

Operations
- Fire Company Chiefs (7)
- Stations 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28
- Company Deputy Chiefs (7)
- Assistant Chiefs, Captains, Lieutenants
- Firefighters (Volunteers & Paid)

Training
- FD Training Officers

Carroll Buracker & Associates, Inc.
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

SUMMARY

The organization of the fire and rescue services is a very important factor in the delivery of services. Currently, the Township of Lower Merion is being served by seven fire companies. While there is substantial teamwork among some members of these companies, there are as many as seven autonomous approaches to fire service delivery and management; each of the seven fire companies focuses on its own organization and response area, and each is attempting to provide as full a range of services as possible.

In the judgment of the Study Team, the Township of Lower Merion fire companies are at a critical point in their collective history. With the increasing demands on the service providers, both operationally and administratively, a more defined organizational structure will be necessary. There are, however, divergent views by members about the need for any changes at this time.

While there are an infinite number of organizational structures for fire services, the Study Team believes that there are basically two options for maintaining and improving the delivery system in the Township of Lower Merion. The options strengthen the current structure by realignment and relying more heavily on an Emergency Services Board to fulfill a broader policy-making and oversight role.

Additionally, consideration should be given to providing an operational focus and a single-team approach with a clearer understanding and acceptance of mutual roles and responsibilities. This could be encouraged and fostered through the revised Emergency Services Board and the implementation of the suggested memorandum of agreements between the Township and each of the seven fire companies. Enhancement of teamwork among the LMFD fire companies and with the chief fire officer and staff may also be facilitated through improved training programs, a subject to be discussed in detail in the Training Chapter of this report.
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

SUMMARY (continued)

It is important to note that the volunteer men and women in the seven fire companies have saved the taxpayers in the Township of Lower Merion a substantial amount of money. Therefore, it is very important to maintain and strengthen the volunteer nature of the current LMFD fire protection system at this time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 The Township Board of Commissioners should consider restructuring the current LMFD Board of Directors into the re-titled Emergency Services Board. This board should be tasked with Township-wide fire coordination and oversight responsibilities.

2.2 The Board of Commissioners is encouraged to include the chief of the Narberth Ambulance Corps as a member of the Emergency Services Board and to include all fire, rescue and EMS service providers on the Board to enhance joint planning and service provision.

2.3 The Township Board of Commissioners is encouraged to task the newly created Emergency Services Board with the responsibility to monitor and report on the progress of recommendations contained in this Study.

2.4 The Township is encouraged to task the chief fire officer and staff with staffing and supporting the activities of the Emergency Services Board.

2.5 The Board of Commissioners is encouraged to establish and enforce the requirement for memoranda of agreement between each of the seven fire companies and the Township, to clarify mutual roles and responsibilities.
FIRE SERVICES ORGANIZATION

RECOMMENDATIONS (continued)

2.6 The Board of Commissioners is encouraged to revise Article 78 to reflect the changes in the organization structure of the Township fire and rescue service outlined in this Study.

2.7 The Emergency Services Board and the LMFD fire companies are encouraged to adopt a volunteer operational rank structure that is consistent among the seven organizations, to include the ranks of district chief, deputy chief, assistant chief, captain and lieutenant; the chief ranks would be at the command level and the ranks of captain and lieutenant would be junior developmental unit officer ranks.

2.8 The fire companies are encouraged to adopt the officer appointment approach; the district chief would be appointed by the board of directors and then the district chief would appoint the team of subordinate officers based primarily on qualifications: education, training and experience.

2.9 The Lower Merion and Narberth volunteer firefighter’s relief associations are encouraged to merge into one relief association in order to improve the equity in the distribution and use of the State relief-related funding and provide for the Narberth Fire Company to benefit from the relief funds generated in the non-Borough portion of its first due response district.

2.10 In the event that the two Lower Merion relief associations do not merge, the Borough and Township should assure that the Narberth Fire Company and its members are provided with funding for equipment, training and benefits equivalent to that funded by the Lower Merion Volunteer Firefighter’s Relief Association for its fire companies and members.