

Ballot Question About Helping Fund Municipal Fire Companies

By Rep. Frank Farry

In the upcoming May 18 primary election, voters will have the opportunity to vote on a ballot referendum impacting some of our fire departments in the commonwealth.

While much attention has been given to the Constitutional amendments to be voted on dealing with the emergency declaration authority of this and future governors, what has been lacking in the public discussion is an important vote Pennsylvanians will make in support of our career fire departments.

Beginning in 2017, a bipartisan, bicameral group of lawmakers, emergency services providers and local officials served on a statewide commission with the task of looking at what could be done legislatively to assist our career and volunteer fire and EMS organizations. Numerous recommendations were incorporated into the commission's final report.

One of the recommendations is to allow municipal career fire departments to participate in the Fire and Emergency Medical Services Loan Program, formally known as Volunteer Loan Assistance Program (VLAP).

VLAP was established in the mid-1970s with the passage of a ballot referendum authorizing the Commonwealth to create a low-interest loan program for volunteer emergency services. This fund is self-sustaining and presently has a balance of \$47 million.

Currently, the fund provides loans at two percent interest to volunteer first responder organizations. Loans can be used for things like station construction and upgrades and the purchasing of new fire apparatus. Loan amounts are capped based upon the project type and the cost.

Since the 1970s ballot referendum only included "volunteer" organizations, the Legislature was required to put the question on the ballot and gain voter approval to allow municipal career fire departments to apply. In the fall of 2020, the Legislature unanimously passed a bill to place this question on the ballot on May 18th. The bill, House Bill 1673, was enthusiastically supported by every major statewide fire service organization, both career and volunteer

Some have argued that this legislation would authorize new debt. That simply is not accurate. The question before voters relates to eligibility to participate only. A "Yes" vote will NOT authorize further debt, nor does it unfairly shift the loans to the larger cities away from our local volunteer first responder organizations.

As our number of volunteer firefighters continues to decline, local governments are forced to hire career personnel to help ensure adequate fire protection within their community. My own

suburban community and many neighboring ones now employ a paid fire engine crew during business hours Monday-Friday to supplement the volunteer firefighters.

As a volunteer firefighter with over 30 years of service, currently serving my 21st year as fire chief in my home community, I understand how important these loans are to those organizations. I also serve as the majority chairman of the House Fire and Emergency Services Caucus where we continue the discussion on ways in which we can support of all our first responders.

I ask you realize the importance of these ballot questions during this low turnout election and consider making time to vote. Outside of the historical issues facing these organizations that give so much of themselves for so many of their fellow Pennsylvanians, both before and since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, our first responders deserve our attention.

All registered Pennsylvania voters can vote on the Constitutional questions and the ballot referendum. I strongly encourage you to research this issue to fully understand the facts surrounding this ballot question and cast your vote according to what you believe is best for your community.

Rep. Frank Farry serves in the Pennsylvania General Assembly representing the 142nd District covering portions of Bucks County. He is currently Chairman of the House Human Services Committee.