

# An open letter to the Youngstown community

**BY GREG ROBERTSON**

President, Youngstown Volunteer Fire Co.

The intent of this letter is to let our community know that fire protection in the Village of Youngstown will continue. Our concern was that the village and Youngstown Volunteer Fire Co. have not been able to reach an agreement acceptable to both parties and would put the community at risk. We didn't want anyone to think that if they called 911 that help would not be sent. The same services that you have come to expect will continue as long as the village allows it.

The last signed contract that the fire company had with the village was for the 2019-20 budget year. Since that contract ended on June 1, 2020 we have had temporary agreements to allow the fire company to continue to provide services to the Village of Youngstown while we continued to reach an agreement.

Every member of the fire company wants to provide the services that we have trained for. We have all heard of sport stars or entertainers say they love what they do and they would do it for nothing. This is usually heard from people that have become rich doing what they do. When a volunteer firefighter says they would do it for free, you know they mean it because that is exactly what they are doing.

To be a member of a fire company today requires a commitment that many people don't realize. To become an interior firefighter or an EMT, you need to complete over 150 hours of training. This training is on top of state training classes, our in-house Thursday night drills, monthly company meetings, committee meetings, work parties and fundraising events. After all this training, you are allowed to get up at all hours of the night, leave in the middle of family gatherings, or miss work to help people you may not even know.

People may wonder why anyone would do this for a job that pays nothing, and I would have to say that it is because we want to help our community members. When people are having what may be their worst day in their lives, they know that a dedicated group of trained first responders will be there for them and their family.

A volunteer fire company is by far, the most cost effective way of providing emergency services to a community. What we must keep in mind is that volunteer does not mean free. We must follow the same rules and standards that a paid department has. The only thing that is different is that there is no payroll to deal with.

Some of the costs that everyone sees are the vehicles and buildings. They are some of our biggest expenses. We maintain a building with a social hall, which is used by not only the fire company but is also available for functions by other nonprofit organizations and public events, such as voting. We also have a club room for use by our members and a fitness room for our members to work out. One of the main causes of firefighter deaths is from heart attacks. Our fitness room was funded by a federal grant that we received several years ago.

The main purpose of our hall is to house our equipment in our



truck room. We moved into our current location in 1977 and remodeled it to meet our needs at the time. Our newer trucks are much larger than the old ones we had when we moved here. We are not able to raise the cabs of our trucks inside our truck room for maintenance. We need to send them out of the hall to have the dealer perform routine maintenance, which can take this equipment out of service for several days. Our master plan is to update our truck room to allow us to handle these repairs at our hall. This will be an expensive undertaking; however we have been planning for this for some time and have been setting money aside. We are currently remodeling our kitchen with money raised through our fundraising events, such as our sportsmen raffles and golf tournaments.

Because of COVID-19 we have not been able to use our social hall, so we decided this would be the time to update our kitchen. Much of this work is being done by the volunteers, themselves. The kitchen has to function for not only everyday events at our hall, but also in case we have to use our hall as an emergency shelter. Our hall is equipped with a natural gas-powered generator that can supply the entire building with electricity in an emergency. This generator was purchased by a grant for \$30,000 that we received several years ago. The new generator replaced a World War II surplus generator that would power part of the building.

We also have many expenses people don't see. There have been limits set on fire equipment, as to how old it can be before it has to be replaced. We just received a grant for \$160,000 to replace our air packs that only had two years before they were out of date. Our grant before that one was for \$50,000 to replace our fire hose that was close to the date that it would have needed to be replaced. As you can see by these numbers, we have done our part to update as required without being a burden on the taxpayers. If we did not go through the grant process, these expenses would have had to be covered by our contract money.

The fire company is funded three ways. Our main funding comes from the Town of Porter and the Village of Youngstown. We also fund our special projects with money we raise through our fundraising events. The last portion of our funding is from donations from the public. Our ambu-

lance is supported by donations from the public, primarily from our annual Drive for Life mailing. We are very fortunate that our community has stepped up every year to support our Drive for Life fund so that tax dollars are not used to purchase or maintain our ambulance. We are working on specs for a new ambulance at this time, and it looks like it will cost over \$200,000.

We purchased a new fire engine a few years ago at a cost of \$700,000. We were able to do this because we managed our money and put funds aside for a new truck. Some may say that a \$700,000 fire truck is a luxury, however we find that it is a tool that is needed to keep our community safe. It is equipped with a state of the art high pressure foam system and a high powered light tower, as well as a full complement of tools and equipment. We have had several structure fires where this truck has demonstrated that it worth every penny.

The trucks are what everyone sees, however there are annual expenses that add up every year. We pay tens of thousands for insurance on our building and equipment. We have to maintain our building and equipment, as well as replace broken or worn out equipment. A set of turnout gear for a new firefighter is over \$3,000 per person with a useful life of 10 years. We have to have much our equipment such as hoses and ladders tested and certified every year. We provide every interior firefighter with cancer insurance coverage. This is a wonderful idea, however the state did not fund it, so it falls on the back of the fire company to spend about \$5,000 a year for this policy. Our concern is that coverage is only a few years old and the cost of the policy will be going up as more and more claims are paid out.

Even with these expenses, your volunteer fire companies give the taxpayers the bang for their buck, than any other department that is funded by tax dollars. The cost of providing the services that we do is going up very year, and we have worked to keep our budget requests at less than a 2% increase every year.

When I joined the Youngstown Volunteer Fire Co. over 40 years ago, things were quite different. Our budget request from the town and village was much smaller. Most of our operating budget came from fundraising, such as our annual Labor Day field days, weekly bingo games, dances and raffles. The members spent

much of their time raising money to keep the fire company going. Many of the changes we made were not because we didn't want the events anymore, but because of changes in gaming laws, insurance increases, less manpower and more competition; it was profitable to hold these events.

We also made the decision that due to the increase in the number of ours need for training and to keep your certifications, a member's time was better spent on taking additional fire and EMS classes than to work bingo games.

We have no issue with the Town of Porter. They have accepted our budget request and have paid us for the year. The Village of Youngstown has not accepted our request and has requested documentation to justify our request. We have had to hire an outside firm to handle these requests and have since provided them to the village board.

We understand that the members of the village board are doing what they believe is the best for the citizens of Youngstown, however we do not agree. The amount in question is less than \$2,000. To put this in perspective, this would be about one trip to the hospital in a paid ambulance would cost. We would also like to point out that the entire amount paid to the fire company by the village for a whole year of fire protection would cover the cost of one paid firefighter for 40 hours a week for one year, and not even start to cover the equipment needed.

As I stated earlier, we do this for free but fire protection is not free. We would also have no issue with doing everything we can to help anyone in our community when they call 911. However with the laws we must follow, we need the permission of the village board to be able to respond to emergencies. An average of over 100 firefighters are killed each year in the line of duty, and we can not take a chance of one our members getting hurt and not having agreement in place.

We had to contact the village and present them with a 30-day extension so fire protection could continue as of June 1, 2021. The board did approve that extension, however we reaching the end of that time and still do not have a permanent agreement in place.

We know that in these difficult times all of elected leaders have a tough job to do and hard decisions to make. We would ask that they look at it from our point of view, that all we asking for is the proper equipment to perform the tasks we have to do safely and efficiently to help our citizens when they need us the most. We would also ask that they give us the respect our members deserve and know that each and every one of us are doing the very best we can and have been mindful at controlling our expenses to do the most at the least cost.

Thank you for your support, and we look forward to another 110 years of service to our community.

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