

The City, The Township, and The Fire Department

January 28, 2019

After reading Supervisor Scott Bennett, on behalf of Grand Blanc Township Board of Trustees letter dated January 24, 2019, I am deeply disappointed that the Township Board has voted to dissolve the fire department cooperation. I do not say that lightly—for over 80 years the City and Township have worked together for the benefit of both of their constituents. I fear the Township Board's decision is not only narrow-sighted, but will be detrimental to the service the Grand Blanc community deserves. I remain committed to what is best for the entire Grand Blanc community, including providing superb fire services our department offers.

As has been a staple of mine, it is important to me that our community is aware of what drives this letter. To those that would be interested in more detail than what I provide herein, I would refer you to the letter the City Council published in the Grand Blanc View in July 2018. But I would be remiss if I did not provide more of an explanation.

While the City and Township agreed in the last two years that the fire department required increased funding, there was a significant difference over how much more taxpayers needed to be assessed. The Township insisted the millage be doubled from 0.5 to 1.0 mill, but given that increased burden would be passed to the taxpayers, City Council requested an independent auditor who specializes in municipal fire issues conduct a "needs assessment" for the Fire Department. This request was rejected by the Township Board.

We also requested that under any new fire ordinance, Fire Station #1, in downtown Grand Blanc, be guaranteed to remain open. Once again, our request was rejected.

Thereafter, the Township Board proceeded to put a .5 mill additional for a total of 1.0 mill for the fire department on the ballot in August 2018, and it was approved by Township voters. To maintain status quo and balance between the Township and City, we placed the same millage request on the November ballot for City residents and it, too, passed. So all residents in the City and Township pay exactly the same amount, 1 mill on assessed valuation, for fire protection. Without support, throughout these discussions, the Township board has repeatedly charged that "the City does not pay its fair share." As I note here, that is simply not true.

As I indicated previously, the Township rejected our request for an independent audit before the millages were proposed, but, after the millage was passed by Township voters, the Township hired MGT Consulting to do a financial assessment of indirect costs for running the fire department. The City contributed 20% of the cost of the MGT Consulting study. MGT Consulting does not specialize in Fire Department needs assessments. It was this study that was presented to the Township Board the evening of January 22, 2019. Immediately after the presentation, and without any discussion or communication with City representatives, the Township Board voted to dissolve the 80-year old fire department relationship.

While those of us in the City have some serious questions about the MGT Consulting findings and underlying assumptions, MGT Consulting has not even made their presentation to the City Council yet. That presentation is scheduled for Wednesday, February 13, at Grand Blanc City Hall. **I strongly encourage interested residents to come and listen to this important discussion.** Moreover, in December, 2018, Grand Blanc City Council voted to engage the Center for Public Safety Management, the exclusive provider of public safety technical services for the International City/County Management Association, to perform an evaluation of our fire protection needs. This group specializes in fire department assessments and has much experience evaluating departments around Michigan and the nation. It is my strong belief that this independent body, with considerable expertise in this area, would provide a fair assessment to be considered in combination with MGT Consulting's approach. But again, the Township Board has been disinterested.

Finally, the 2019 budget for the fire department was to be 1.5 mills each from the City and the Township. 1.0 mill was approved by the voters of each governmental unit and 0.5 mill was to be committed from each general fund. Last summer, the Township board was adamant that 1.5 mills was needed to properly fund the fire department. However, while City Council approved the full 1.5 mills for the 2019 fire department budget on December 12, 2018, the Township only approved 1.0 mill. Since the Township Board has claimed the need for 1.5 mills for the fire department, it begs the question: why have they committed only 1.0 mill to the 2019 budget instead of the full 1.5 that the City has committed?

I want to assure Grand Blanc City residents that your Mayor and City Council are dedicated to providing the best, and most cost-effective, fire protection possible. We will proceed by looking at all available options for fire protection in the City.

I have lived in Grand Blanc for 40 years and been in City government for 20 years. My goal remains the same as it has always been: a better community, for the whole community.

Sincerely,



Mayor Susan Soderstrom