



## **Mayor Cantu's Presentation on the Fire District's 2024 Budget Hearing –**

### **January 22, 2024 @ 6:00pm**

- Good evening. I, and the other members of the Township Committee are here tonight to be on record regarding the proposed fire district budget and cap exemption request scheduled for voter consideration on February 17th.
- As you should recall, we asked the Fire Commissioners District leadership to discuss with the Township Committee what we have been hearing indirectly about the operations and expansion of the fire services in Plainsboro. It was concerning to us when we were hearing this not from you, but from others outside of the Fire Commissioners.
- What we did receive indirectly was a letter from Fire Chief Collins addressed to the “Residents of Plainsboro”, not the Township Committee. The letter attempted to explain the necessary increase in the budget and the necessary growth of the Fire Company.
- On November 20, 2023 at the request of the Township Committee (a long standing request) members of the Fire District Board of Commissioners and the Fire Company leadership did come before the Township Committee for a presentation.
- The information presented was vague, and not definitive, at best. However, the take away was that the 2024 proposed budget was going to need to increase very substantially due to the need to grow the Fire Company to what the current Commissioners believe will meet community needs.
- While we asked at the November 20 public meeting for detailed information on the proposed budget, and 3-5 year manpower projections, that the district said they had, the Township government never received anything. There is an inherent responsibility for the Fire District leadership to voluntarily share relevant information pertaining to public safety.
- In fact, again on **November 21<sup>st</sup>, December 14<sup>th</sup>, and again on the 26<sup>th</sup>**, requests were made by the Township without any information being forwarded to us. It was not until we met with Matthew Caliente, of the Professional Firefighters Association of New Jersey, on January 11<sup>th</sup> that we received a draft of the budget on January 12<sup>th</sup>.
- Furthermore, based on information submitted to the State Department of Community Affairs, it appears that the Fire District voted on some version of a budget on December 12, 2023 and/or January 9, 2024. Why wasn't that budget shared with the Township?

- What does the budget document tell us? The proposed budget will increase from 2023 (\$2,658,577) to 2024 (\$4,205,577), by \$1,547,000, an exceptionally high **58% increase** from the previous year!
- While I respect the fact that you are an independent body with taxing authority, the increase is very concerning to us.
- When you presented to us on November 20, you said you currently have 13 paid staff, growing from 8 staff, and it is the District Commissioners plan to grow to **32 full-time paid fire personnel**, in the near future.
- Our analysis of five-year statistical data from 2018 – 2023 of Calls for Service within Plainsboro shows **only a slight increase**.
- Further, data for Calls for Service show increases for 2023 appear to be from fire responses to accidents, and traffic assistance, not life-threatening situations.
- Also, your mutual aid calls to other towns have been increasing. Over the past three years approximately 21% of all alarms are mutual aid calls, **and** automatic alarms and other non-life safety calls tie up units and staffing for approximately 41% of all reported incidents.
- Due to the lack of transparency, the significant budget request asking for a mandatory waiver of the 2% state CAP, questionable and unsupported staffing needs and growth projections and the very significant financial impact to our residents, we have deep concerns about your budget request, and we unanimously oppose the proposed budget as provided to the residents and submitted to the state. Further, we oppose the election scheduled on February 17 requesting a massive cap exception, from \$46,000 to \$1.57m (a 34-fold increase), leading to a massive large tax increase.
- The Township Committee requests that you do not adopt this budget, we strongly encourage the Board of Commissioners to meet with the Director of Public Safety/Police Chief Blanchard, Township Committee and other appropriate township staff.
- Discussions should include: alternatives that minimize property tax impacts, and effectively meet the safety needs of the community, including current budget and manpower oversight, management and leadership, review volunteer manpower and recruitment options, and reviewing all staff needs current and future personnel.
- We hope for a positive resolution to ensure the protection of the community and the stability of future fire preparedness.

Thank you.