



From Fire District to Fire Department

New Jersey Department of Community Affairs (DCA) and Plainsboro Township work together to strengthen fire services

Jacquelyn Suárez, Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Community Affairs, and Anthony Cancro, Township Administrator, Plainsboro

As of January 1, 2025, Plainsboro Township officially assumed responsibility for fire protection services, marking the end of Fire District No. 1 and the establishment of a municipal fire department staffed by both career and volunteer firefighters. This significant change reflects months of coordinated planning between Plainsboro and the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) and was driven by the goal of delivering more efficient, accountable, and effective fire protection services.

“We believe that this action significantly strengthens fire protection for our residences and businesses,” said Plainsboro Mayor Ed Yates. “We greatly appreciate DCA officials and our dedicated municipal staff for making this transition possible.”

Background and Growing Challenges

Originally created in 1990 by voter petition under N.J.S.A. 40A:14-70 et seq., Plainsboro Fire District No. 1 operated as an independent taxing authority for 33 years. Managed by a board of fire commissioners, the fire district oversaw all aspects of fire protection separate from the township government.

In early 2023, it became apparent to the township that the fire district was struggling financially and managerially. The fire district circulated information to the public about an impending ballot question that asked whether the board of fire commissioners should be authorized to exceed the State’s 2% property tax cap. The proposed \$1.5 million budget increase, which exceeded the statutory 2% levy cap, was intended to support staffing, equipment replacement, and facility upkeep, but was presented to voters with limited explanation regarding the need for the drastic increase.

Despite outreach from then-Mayor Peter Cantu and Township Committee members, the fire district was largely unresponsive to requests for detailed financial projections, operational plans, and volunteer recruitment strategies. The district’s failure to provide this information led the Township Committee to unanimously oppose the ballot measure.



The Ballot Question

“Shall the Board of Commissioners of Fire District Number 1 in Plainsboro Township be authorized to increase the 2024 amount to be raised by taxation in the Fire District annual budget, by \$1,500,000 as provided by N.J.S.A. 40A:4-45.45, notwithstanding that its amount to be raised by taxation will exceed the two percent (2.0%) increase limitation.”

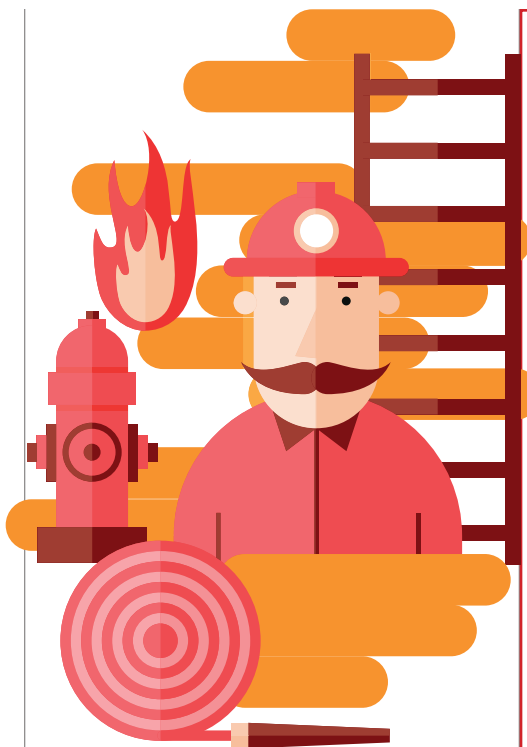
On February 17, 2024, Plainsboro voters rejected the proposed tax increase by a five-to-one margin—1,091 votes against and just 200 in favor.

A Collaborative Path Forward

Following the referendum’s defeat, Plainsboro officials moved to dissolve the fire district under N.J.S.A. 40A:5A-20. Believing that municipal oversight would provide better service delivery and fiscal management, the township engaged DCA’s Division of Local Government Services to perform an operational study of the fire district and offer technical assistance.

The study, conducted by the Division’s Local Assistance Bureau, began in April 2024 and concluded with recommendations that Plainsboro add four firefighter positions to the fire district’s existing 13. It also assessed equipment, facilities, call volumes, and mutual aid agreements to shape a sustainable model for service delivery.

To support its dissolution application, Plainsboro retained the firm Suplee, Clooney & Company to analyze the fire district’s financial records. Their review found significant delays and deficiencies in the fire district’s reporting, including the absence of a recent audit beyond 2021. The limited



unaudited financial statements indicated a degrading financial picture for Plainsboro Fire District.

With this data in hand, Plainsboro submitted a comprehensive, 38-page dissolution application to DCA’s Local Finance Board (LFB) in September 2024.

Dissolution and Transition

At the October 9, 2024, LFB hearing, then-Mayor Peter Cantu testified to the need for change, citing a lack of public trust in the fire district, Plainsboro’s proven operational infrastructure, and the capacity to manage fire services within the Department of Public Safety. Suplee, Clooney & Company and township staff also provided testimony supporting the dissolution.

The LFB unanimously approved Plainsboro’s application, officially dissolving Fire District No. 1, effective January 1, 2025.

Today, Plainsboro’s newly structured fire service is operational as part of the municipal government. The township’s approach prioritizes transparency, professional management, and responsiveness to community needs—hallmarks of the strong local governance that residents rely on. 🇯🇵

What Is the Local Assistance Bureau?

The Local Assistance Bureau (LAB), a unit within the Department of Community Affairs (DCA), offers no-cost technical assistance to municipalities across the state. Created to support fiscal health and operational efficiency, LAB is staffed by experienced former municipal officials with deep knowledge in administration, finance, public safety, public works, and more.

Technical Assistance Advisors are former municipal officials with expertise and skill sets in the following areas:

- Administration
- Finance/Purchasing
- Human Resources
- Labor Negotiations
- Police Dispatch/Communications
- Public Safety
- Public Works
- Risk Management/Insurance

The LAB partners with local governments to identify inefficiencies, recommend best practices, and improve service delivery without compromising accountability or transparency. Their process includes a thorough review of financials, operations, and staffing culminating in a formal assessment and actionable guidance.

Municipalities can rely on LAB as a trusted resource to help achieve excellence in local governance.

To learn more about LAB visit, www.nj.gov/dca/dlgs/programs/lab.shtml.