

Bern Township

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An Open Letter to the Residents and Property Owners of Bern Township

Dear Residents and Property Owners:

You may have recently learned that the Bern Township Board of Supervisors intend to vote to decertify the Greenfields Fire Company. This decision was reached after several years of discussions with the leadership of the Greenfields Fire Company in an attempt to maintain and support a volunteer department. These actions have included meetings with both leadership and members, offering Township staff support, assistance in public relation and recruitment, and supporting an independent consultant to assist in improving their ability to provide fire protection to the Township.

Since 2016, there has been a steady decline in both membership and response to fire calls by the Company. In 2019, the Board of Supervisors commissioned a study in cooperation with the Center for Excellence in Local Government (CELG) at Albright College. This evaluation examined all components of the Fire Company from membership to finances and included participation of Greenfields Fire Company leadership, elected officials, former fire company officers and Bern Township Emergency Management. The study draft, which was completed in 2022, listed various options to overcome the challenges of the Fire Company. These options were reviewed and discussed with leadership of the Fire Company in 2023.

The most pressing concerns were the Fire Company's inability to provide adequate fire protection, lack of consistent leadership, or succession plans and personnel issues, especially recruitment and retention. Since that time, the Township officials and Fire Company officials have been discussing these matters with no effective corrective action taken by the Fire Company. From 2019 to the present time, the Board of Supervisors has asked the Greenfields Fire Company to provide the Township with a workable plan to address these problems. However, no effective action plan was provided by the Fire Company.

In June of 2023, the Township officials met with the Fire Company leadership and stated that having basically two persons serving as the fire company on calls for help was not sustainable. To try to solve this problem the Township offered to pay firefighters, as independent contractors, to cover daily shifts, (after the Fire Chief determined that all shifts could be covered), and to provide a monetary stipend to those who could not commit to covering shifts, but would still be able to answer calls on occasion. The Fire Chief responded that he would hold a meeting with membership to discuss this. Township officials asked for the results of that meeting, but never received a response, so it was assumed that there were not enough volunteers to cover the shifts.

The Township has kept track of the Greenfields Fire Company call response statistics during 2024. From January through November, there were 522 total calls for help. Greenfields did not respond to 78 of those calls. One of the calls originated from the Reading Airport Terminal and surrounding fire companies had to cover for Greenfields as they did not get out of their station for that call. In 2024, there were 212 calls where only one person responded and for 132 calls, members responded in their own cars, with no fire apparatus.

Greenfields Fire Company has even had junior firefighters and fire police members responding to calls by themselves, which is very unsafe for those less experienced members. Having basically two individuals responding to calls is unsustainable. Unfortunately, one of those individuals became injured or ill for six months of 2024, which led to a significant decline in the efficiency of the Fire Department.

Based on this information, and due to the Company's inability to sustain adequate fire protection, after many discussions, (including conferring with state officials), a decision was made by the Board of Supervisors that action be taken to officially decertify the Greenfields Fire Company as the primary provider of fire protection services to Bern Township, pursuant to Pennsylvania Law for Townships of the Second Class.

Additionally, this decision was also based on the pending review in 2025 of Bern Township's current Insurance Service Office (ISO) Public Protection Certification (PPC). This review considers several factors within the municipality, most importantly the availability of adequate, consistent fire protection for homeowners and commercial property owners. Greenfields current score of 5 out of 10 was established in 2015. Once the score is established, it stays in place for ten years. The PPC score is used by insurers to set your property insurance rates.

If the 2025 survey shows that there is a lack of any critical element in the PPC survey, the result would be a significant increase in property insurance rates for both homeowners and commercial property owners.

In the immediate future, surrounding fire departments will cover fire calls in Bern Township. Bern Township is working on, and close to securing, an agreement with an adjacent career fire department to become the primary fire department for Bern Township.

Unfortunately, volunteering has been declining with each passing year. With a career staff in place, firefighters will be on duty for defined periods, increasing their availability to respond to fire calls and eliminating non-responses or "scratched" fire calls.

The Township also intends to work with the career fire department to eventually place staff in the current Greenfields station sometime in the future.

It is unfortunate that these actions have to be taken, but Fire Protection and Public Safety is a priority in this municipality. Thank you.

Bern Township