

Tabernacle Township Committee Minutes Special Town Hall Meeting: December 16, 2013

The meeting was called to order by Mayor Stephen V. Lee, IV followed by the flag salute.

Sunshine Notice: This special meeting is called pursuant to the provisions of the Open Public Meetings Law. Notice of the meeting was sent to the Central Record and Burlington County on December 4, 2013. In addition a copy of this notice was posted on the bulletin board in the municipal building and filed in the office of the Municipal Clerk. Notices on the bulletin board have remained continuously posted. Minutes of this meeting will reflect the purpose from which the meeting was called.

Roll Call

- Joseph Barton, Township Committee
- Kimberly A. Brown, Township Committee
- Richard Franzen, Township Committee
- Joseph Yates, IV, Deputy Mayor
- Stephen V. Lee, IV, Mayor

Also In attendance

- Douglas A. Cramer, Township Administrator
- Terry W. Henry, Chief Finance Officer
- Peter C. Lange, Jr. Township Solicitor
- La Shawn R. Barber, RMC, Township Clerk

Discussion

Tabernacle Township Committee has scheduled a special meeting on Monday, December 16, 2013 at the prevailing time of 6:30 P.M. A hearing is being held at the request of taxpayers' petition to dissolve the Tabernacle Fire District located in the Township of Tabernacle. Formal action may be taken on routine matters related to Tabernacle Township. **This meeting is open to the public and held at Kenneth R. Olson Middle School, 132 New Road, Tabernacle, NJ (08088).**

Mayor's Announcement

Mayor Lee announced that this is going to be a public hearing for members of the public to communicate to what we are talking about and register view points on this issue; to do a lot of talking and listening. Mayor Lee spoke that he appreciates the public's interest and involvement on this very sensitive issue. The issue of the potential dissolution of the fire district was presented to the Committee as a result of a petition filed by members of the Communities. This has not been brought on by a decision of the Committee. Once the petition is filed and certified by La Shawn Barber, Township Clerk; the Township Committee has the responsibility of conducting a hearing and a vote, which is required by statute. Most importantly, making it very clear, this is not about Medford Farms Volunteer Fire Company. The Fire District is the one with the taxable entities within the Township. In your tax bill, you will notice different collections for taxes: Municipal, County, School and Fire District. The Fire District has the pipeline from the fundamental governing body of the Fire Commission to the taxpayers. When you pay your taxes, 6.5 cents for every \$100 goes towards the Fire Commission. This five member Commission are elected every third Saturday in February. These public officials oversee a certain percentage of your tax base. The Township has no oversight on this particular taxable entity. The only time the Governing Body will have an oversight is when the budget is defeated by the taxpayers. The question of what we are talking about tonight is whether or not how this taxable entity which is between the tax base and the fire company. The Fire Commission was started as a result of a petition in 1984 with 158 signatures. The petition went before the Township Committee, at the time being a three member Committee, on January 24, 1985 Ordinance 1985-2 created a fire district which was presented for a public hearing and passed. Resolution 1985-9 also passed establishing the date and time for motion of the order. In March of 1985, a petition was also filed to span the fire district and a public hearing was held April 21, 1985. On May 31, 1985, the decision to continue the district was made and we have been living with the district ever since then. We are here to talk about, whether the taxpayers want to continue with the fire district or eliminate the fire district. It is a decision that is to be made by this Committee and it is an opportunity for the taxpayers to tell the Governing Body what you want to do. Once the decision is made, it is important to move forward on this. This is a very sensitive issue and emotional for many and on behalf of the Township Committee we want this issue to be resolved and want to move forward as a community.

Since the Fire Commission has a meeting this evening at 8:00 P.M., they will have the opportunity to speak first along with anyone who plans on attending the Fire District meeting. If you are unable get your comments in within your four minute period, written comments can be submitted to the Committee for consideration up until 4pm tomorrow for additional comments.

John Burger, Chairman of Tabernacle Board of Fire Commissioners read into the record sent to the Township Committee:

This letter is written and presented on behalf of the Fire District relative to the dissolution hearing scheduled for Monday, December 16, 2013 at 6:30 P.M. The Fire District submits the following:

1. The Fire District, in accordance with New Jersey statute, must introduce its budget no later than 60 days prior to the annual election. The annual election is scheduled for February 15, 2014 and accordingly the budget must be introduced no later than December 17, 2013. The Fire District had to reschedule its regular Fire District meeting to insure that the statutory requirements referenced were adhered to. The Fire District therefore rescheduled its meeting for Monday, December 16, 2013 at 8:00 P.M. Appropriate notice of the date change was provided to 2 newspapers and the Township Clerk to insure compliance with the Open Public Meeting Act. The meeting was scheduled prior to any date being established for a hearing to dissolve the Fire District. However, the Township notwithstanding these facts scheduled the dissolution hearing as the fire district meeting. The Township was requested to change the date of the hearing and has not done so. The Township, by letter from the Mayor, advised that the Fire District could provide written statements or materials for consideration by the Township Committee in advance of the hearing. In addition the Fire District was advised that any public comments would first be heard from Fire District Commissioners and then members of the public wishing to attend the Fire District meeting. This is abundantly unfair to the Fire District and the public and does not allow for a fair hearing. It is reasonable to assume that there may be questions from the members of the public in attendance at the hearing and/or members of the Township Committee, which the commissioners will not be present to address as they will have left to attend the Commissioners' meeting. In addition the Commissioners should have the right, together with other members of the public, to hear comments of those present and to respond with additional public comment as necessary. This right is being denied resulting in a hearing, which is unfair to the Fire District and members of the public who wish to attend the hearing and attend the Commissioners' meeting. The Fire District could not reschedule the Fire District meeting and comply with the statutory requirements relative to budget introduction. The Township could have rescheduled the public hearing to a different date. The New Jersey statutes require the time and place of the hearing be scheduled on not less than 10 days' notice. The statute does not mandate that the hearing will be scheduled within a certain amount of days of an application to dissolve the Fire District. Proceeding with the hearing on December 16, 2013 for the reasons set forth is inappropriate.
2. The petition requesting dissolution of the Fire District was submitted to the Township on November 25, 2013. Pursuant to the New Jersey statutes the Township Clerk is to verify that the application contains signatures of at least 5% of the registered voters, which is required to proceed with a hearing on the application. The Township Clerk advised that sufficient signatures existed, however, there are serious issues relating to the petition process and the manner in which the signatures were obtained and whether the proper number of signatures was obtained. It is the position of the Fire District that sufficient signatures were not obtained; therefore the hearing should not be conducted. Many of the signatures are either indiscernible, not complete first and/or last names and/or utilize initials instead of complete names. These names should have been excluded from the computation of the number of signatures required. In addition the petition contains date of signature and many of the signatures do not contain a date or include a date many months prior to the date of submission of the petition to the Township. Those signatures should not have been deemed valid and included in determining the number of valid signatures required. Finally, the form of petition includes a "comment" section, which is entirely inappropriate. The Fire District submits that sufficient signatures were not obtained in accordance with the statutory requirements and therefore the hearing should not have been scheduled.
3. The Fire District was established in 1986. The Fire District was established to allow the Fire Company to continue to provide efficient and effective fire protection services and have the financial ability to address its needs and provide this service. The township, despite its good intentions, was not able to provide and address the needs of the Fire Company. The township is under a 2% CAP the same as the Fire District and with the competing needs of police and the other Township Departments, in the absence of the Fire District, it is reasonable to assume that the Township will still be unable to properly address the needs of the Fire Company.
4. The Fire District budget proposed for 2014 maintains the same Fire District tax rate as the previous year. This is despite the fact that ratable have decreased and expenses have risen for various items, which the Fire District cannot control. Unlike any other municipal entity the Fire District budget is voted on by the

public. If the budget is defeated the Township Committee establishes the final budget amount. A public hearing is conducted by the Fire District prior to adoption of the budget to allow comment from the public. It is obvious therefore, that the public has final say over any proposed budget.

5. In relation to capital projects the Fire District cannot proceed with a capital project without voter approval. At numerous public meetings the Fire District openly discussed purchase of various fire equipment and fire trucks. The Fire Company presented its needs to the Fire District, which discussed the issues at length and determined these purchases would be appropriate to insure proper firematic services be provided. In relation to the recent special election to purchase a fire truck the Fire District attempted to establish a different date for the election. The County was contacted relative to having the voters at the election in November approve or disapprove of the fire truck purchase. The County advised the Fire District that this issue could not be on the ballot in November. Accordingly, the Fire District scheduled the special election. A fire District cannot purchase a fire truck without voter approval and therefore, the voters were asked for their approval. If the voters said no the fire truck could not be purchased.
6. When the Fire District establishes its proposed budget it examines all projected expenditures and establishes its budget addressing the need to provide fire protection services and the need to provide these services in the most cost effective manner possible. The Commissioners are taxpayers also. Projected budgets are the best estimates possible based on all information received and resulting surplus from unexpended monies from the budget is quite common to any municipal entity. This surplus is utilized to offset future year's budgets. While the Fire District intent is always to provide a fiscally responsible budget and tax rate the fire District has been successful in this regard. In addition, the fire tax it is submitted is reasonable based on the service provided and certainly when compared to the cost of providing fire protection services in many municipalities.
7. The petition to dissolve the Fire District contains many statements, which are not accurate and/or unclear. The petition references funding for the volunteer firefighters or the municipal budget, which for reasons previously set forth has not been sufficient. The petition also references alleged fiscal irresponsibility relative to handling taxpayer's money in relation to the Fire Company. It is unclear as to what this allegation is and it is denied equivocally. There is a reference to an inability to follow rules and regulations resulting in a \$2,400 payment by the Fire District. This references an alleged violation of OPRA by the Fire District concerning providing of minutes relative to a meeting with the Township. The Fire District was ordered to pay counsel fees and costs concerning this issue. The Fire District followed advice of counsel in regard to this issue and request and advice by the township not to release the minutes of the meeting relating to litigation. The Court determined that the litigation did not involve the Fire District and therefore the minutes had to be provided. The Fire District has recently secured new legal counsel who is certainly experienced relative to Fire Districts and who has and will continue to provide proper legal advice to the Fire District.

For the above-enumerated reasons, the Fire District maintains that dissolution of the Fire District is not appropriate or justified. The petition submitted did not satisfy the statutory requirements and therefore no hearing should have been scheduled. Additionally, the conducting of the hearing on December 16th is not appropriate or justified for the reasons previously set forth. The Fire District is an appropriate manner of providing fire protection services for the residents and taxpayers of Tabernacle Township. It is the most efficient and effective method of providing services and for the reasons previously stated the best method of providing services by the Fire Company and the best method of providing financial support for the Fire Company. It is respectfully submitted that there is no basis to justify dissolution of the Fire District. If the Township should precede in this manner the Fire District will undertake any and all actions deemed necessary to protect the Fire District and to prevent its dissolution for all the reasons set forth.

At this time, Mr. Burger added the reasons that were set forth in the petition he believes it pertains to a different fire board. The new fire board that is in place has come a long way in the past couple of years. The fire district has set a lot of new projects in place to save the taxpayers money, such as a new solar project. There have been a lot of issues that have come up and corrected a lot of issues. A new Counsel was hired to advise the board.

Nancy Freeman, 29 Washington Way/Treasurer Tabernacle Fire District spoke of the reason there are not five Commissioners here tonight is per the advice of our Attorney who sent this letter as addressed:

Dear Mayor and Township Committee:

Please be advised that I represent the Fire District and reference the hearing scheduled for December 16, 2013 to address the issue of dissolution of the Fire District, I will not be able to attend the hearing as I have always done in the past, which will result in my being out of the state which I cannot alter. However, I wish to

supplement the letter being provided to you by the Fire District to address some of the issues related to any proposed dissolution. Accordingly, I see as follows:

1. I have reviewed the letter from the Fire District being submitted relative to any proposed dissolution and believe the issues raised are valid and of significant concern. I have been involved in other dissolution hearings which have never been conducted in the manner outlined. I would submit that the hearing as scheduled is unfair to the Commissioners and members of the public who are provided a choice of staying at the hearing or attending the Commissioners' meeting. In addition there are significant issues as outlined in the Fire District's letter relative to the petition which must be addressed.

2. I am the attorney for the New Jersey State Association of Fire Districts and numerous individual Fire Districts statewide and since my very recent retention as legal counsel for the Fire District have reviewed many issues with the Commissioners and provided legal advice. I believe that the Fire District in receiving appropriate legal advice will change its method of operation as necessary to insure compliance with all applicable legal requirements.

3. There are approximately 180 plus Fire Districts in this state. Basically, Fire Districts were created to provide a stable financial ability for fire service to be provided and to have fire companies provide effective and efficient fire service to the public. Many municipalities are well intentioned but because of fiscal constraints cannot provide the necessary financial assistance to allow fire companies to address its operational and capital needs protection services.

4. All operations of the Fire District are over-viewed and regulated by the Department of Community Affairs. The Fire District by statute has an annual audit conducted which is provided to DCA. The proposed annual budget for the Fire District is provided for review to DCA. In addition, the Fire District budget is the only budget not voted on by the public. Unless there is a request to exceed the CAP or the school election is not in November a school budget is not voted on by the public. Capital expenditures must be approved by the voters for Fire Districts before the project can proceed. Municipalities do not have its capital projects voted on by the voters. Boards of Education have capital approval votes however if the proposed project is not approved the Board of Education can still seek approval from the State to proceed with the project. This is not true for Fire Districts.

5. I have engaged in repeated dialogue with various legislators and met with DCA Attorney General's office and Division of Elections relative to the Fire District election date which is scheduled the third Saturday in February. The DCA and Division of Elections have confirmed the difficulties in changing the election date. In multiple Fire District municipalities the election districts and geographic boundaries of the four Districts do not align. Therefore if the annual Fire District election was held the same day as the general municipal election voters could potentially be voting at two separate physical locations. There is currently discussion with various legislators to allow for districts in single district municipalities the option of having an election in November and not having the budget voted on as long as the Fire District does not exceed the CAP. Tabernacle Fire District endorses this proposal as do many other Fire Districts. Greater voter participation in Fire District elections is desired and is constantly being discussed with the legislators.

6. The Fire District has various issues on which it has requested legal guidance and will amend its manner of operation as necessary. This will hopefully alleviate some of the past incidents that may have occurred.

The above information has been provided in supplement to the information provided by the Fire District to inform the Township Committee and public relative to various issues concerning the Fire District. It is respectfully submitted that the Fire District should not be dissolved as it is a reasonable and proper method of providing fire protection services. I would be available and would welcome any questions upon my return to the state and believe such a process would be beneficial relative to the future operation of the Fire District. Thank you for your consideration. Very truly yours, Richard M. Barslow.

At this point, Nancy Freeman read the following into the record on behalf of Rudolph Saldan, Commissioner.

To: Township Committee

The Fire Commission was established in 1986 when the township was no longer able to provide for the needs of the Fire Company to continue to provide effective fire protection services that the residents of the township expected and deserved. The members of the Medford Farms Volunteer Fire Company went to the public/township residents, to obtain signatures on a petition to establish the Commission and the Township

Committee permitted the Commission to be formed to better serve the residents of the Township and provide for the safety of our fire fighters. Safety of the Township residents and our fire fighters is of the utmost importance to all the Commissioners and they make sure the fire company receives all the training and equipment needed for the safety of the residents and fire fighters. The District has supported the Fire Company for more than 25 years with one of the lowest, if not **the** lowest budget in Burlington County. The District realizes some mistakes have been made in the past, although some have been due to misinformation given to the Commissioners and be assured that steps have been and continue to be taken to prevent this from happening in the future. If the Township takes over the upkeep of the firehouse, the vehicles and the maintenance of the vehicles, it may cause some difficulties for the Township as well as incur additional expenses not currently incurred by the taxpayers. The district hopes the Township will continue to support the Commission and the Volunteer Fire Company to enable them to continue the good work the taxpayers are accustomed to and deserve.

At this point, Mayor Lee clarified that this is not a relationship to disband the fire company in Tabernacle. The way that the fire company and the fire commission are related, the Medford Farms Volunteer Company started long before the Commission started. The Fire Company is contracted with the Fire Commission. In the event that the Township Committee makes a decision to disband the Fire Commission, the expectation is that fire service would not change. Medford Farms Volunteer Fire Company would still be the representatives to fight fires in Tabernacle. The Township Committee would have to enter into a contract.

Fran Brooks, 78 Moores Meadow Road, spoke of her examination and analysis in her blog, Tabernacle Journal Post as to why the District should not be dissolved. She focused on the validated petition as she questions that it appears to be defective and raised concerns of a township employee's signature who no longer resides in the Township.

Stuart Brooks, 78 Moores Meadow Road, spoke about being disappointed with the scheduling of this hearing and raises comments describing the process as it was wrongly describing the District as being a middle man with a pipeline into essentially the wallets of the taxpayers. There is more oversight from their budget taxation standpoint of the Commission, than the Township Committee. The Fire District is composed of volunteers and they manage the fire company, which is also a group of volunteers that serve the Township for the good work they do. If you proceed with the vote to dissolve just the governmental agency, you will also precede to rip the social fabric of the Township.

Jim Jones, 16 Wimbledon Way, spoke of residing in Tabernacle for 34 years, signing the petition and commented that he feels that we are not receiving a full serving Commission from the District specifically with the truck vote. Mr. Jones spoke of his frustration with no oversight and believes many people should vote.

Mark LeMire, 13 Washington Way, thanked the Township Committee for having this meeting and spoke of signing the petition. One primary issue that he has with the Fire District is the feeling of being disenfranchised by people that were put into place to represent them and it being disheartened. He felt that it was designed to minimize voter turnout as he spoke about the most recent vote meant to be held on July 4th weekend and rescheduled for Columbus Day weekend. It is the responsibility of the Fire District or any taxing authority to make sure they do not disenfranchise or private obscure votes. We applaud the Township Committee for setting up this meeting, the fire fighters and volunteers. The practices have not served the people well.

Betsy Piner, 75 Bozarthtown Road, spoke that when one is an active volunteer it is painful to hear criticism. The function seems to no longer serve a proper purpose. The taxpayers are now paying for an auditor, counsel and a whole other layer of government that could be abolished if the fire district were abolished. Ms. Piner apologized and spoke of her embarrassment for allowing a petition that was circulated at the firehouse dinner during the senior citizen function sponsored by the Township Committee.

Ralph Shrom, spoke of signing and supporting the petition and that he seldom stands up at these meetings but wants you to understand that we fight over equipment; that we are sued in a lawsuit. Sued and fight over legal fees. We have the loss of income from a cell tower, The Pineland violations, Opra problems and being sued resulting in legal fees from that. There is the issue with the failure to comply with election notification laws, scheduling of special meetings. I have nothing but the highest regards for our first responders. As for mutual aid, it is important to find out exactly what our fire company does for the amount of calls they respond to.

Jason Litowitz, 5 Horseshoe Court, spoke of only residing in Tabernacle for a handful of years and spoke of it being an absolutely wonderful town. However, like all good things, the town is not without its faults. Over the

last number of months, I have come to believe that the Fire District is one of the largest faults the town has. As I began to look into the Fire District's operations, my goal at first was not to try to force their dissolution. Instead, my goal for months has been to try to ensure that the Fire District complied with the laws. Unfortunately, it is now my belief that the Fire District has forgotten that they represent not just the fire company, but those very residents they tax. For example, despite retiring over a million dollars net in debt service this year, they appear to be on a track to provide virtually zero tax relief to residents. Additionally, at best, they provide lip service to many of the laws that regulate them, and have expressed virtually no interest in changing their procedures. For these reasons among many others, I now feel the Township should dissolve the Fire District and taxing Tabernacle residents 2) If the Fire District is dissolved, will it affect fire combat readiness and risk the safety of Tabernacle residents? With respect to the latter question, the Fire District has made it clear numerous times in their public meetings that all operational decisions are made by the Fire Chief, not by them. As the Fire Chief is part of the fire company and not the Fire District, I would therefore argue that there would be zero change whatsoever to fire combat readiness. With respect to the former question, I would like to point out that the Fire District has a history of violating the law. For example, they engaged in illegal electioneering in their attempts to convince the public to approve the purchase of a new fire truck in July. They held meetings throughout the year without publishing notice in town newspapers as required by law-even after I pointed this out to them. They attempted to hold an election in July, but were forced to cancel it due to insufficient posting, not only wasting taxpayer dollars but causing an embarrassment upon the town in the local papers. They attempted to hold a meeting in November which they were forced to cancel at the last minute, also due to insufficient public notice – causing yet more embarrassment and waste. Even tonight, they are trying to hold a meeting in violation of the law by not publishing the meeting in the Central Record as they are required to. Until I repeatedly pushed them, they did not provide all information required by law on their website; and even after their updates, based on a voicemail I received from the Department of Community Affairs, I believe their site is still insufficient. As confirmed by a letter from the DCA after the fact, their ballot for the October election was illegal; even though I brought this to their attention before the election, they still proceeded with it. I would also like to point out that the Fire District, by necessity, has its own election every February, costing taxpayer's money. They also have a history of wasteful practices, only some of which I alluded to earlier. For these and many other reasons, I believe the Fire District should be dissolved. Thank you.

Megan Jones, Horseshoe Court spoke of being a Township resident for 30 years and recognizing that the Fire District and Fire Company are two separate entities. I want to make it very clear that I have nothing but the highest regard for the men and women who serve on the Fire Company, including those who are our Fire Commissioners. I know first-hand the sacrifice they and their families make to volunteer to protect our community because my father was a member of the Township Emergency during many of my childhood and teenage years. More than one Thanksgiving and Christmas, the pager went off, and everything went on hold. Regardless of the outcome of this meeting, I feel we have an obligation as a community to provide these volunteer firefighters with the tools and training necessary to protect the community and return safely to their families at the end of each call. If the Township Committee decides to dissolve the Fire District, I feel the community has an obligation to work with the firefighters to make that they are properly prepared to protect this community. A number of speakers have brought up the importance of community voting on fire budgets. I do not vote necessarily for school budget, township budget, state budget, or federal budget. I vote for the representatives whom I entrust for that responsibility. I do not necessarily understand why the Fire District be more important than our Federal or State budgets. I'm a numbers person. I've taken a look at the Fire District election votes for the last few years, and I certainly noticed that the number of vote cast are dramatically lower than the township or school or general elections. In fact, what I can say is in the past 3 years, is the number of voters in both our school and township elections are five to six times as many for Fire District. I can't tell you definitively why that is. It might be the date, chosen by the state. It might be because it's not well publicized. It may be that a large amount of our community does not know we have a Fire District. I am not sure the reason why. But I do know that a larger cross-section of our voters have voted for you, Township Council members, than the Fire District commissioners, and I think that that is a point that we need to recognize as a community. I think we all want to see more community involvement, and not less. I do not feel the Fire District has been serving the Fire Department or this community well this past year. I've been going to meetings and I'm increasingly concerned about the lack of oversight for their organization. As a result, I have no choice but to feel that it should be dissolved. However, and I appreciate Mayor Lee mentioning this, I feel very strongly that if such a move is made, that the township must work with the firefighters to create a smooth transition to make sure that they have the support that they need. Thank you.

Howard Ises, Consultant, spoke that he is associated with Mr. Braslow, Esq. and wanted to go over a few facts. Spoke of his previous life before retiring, he worked for the State of NJ with the Division of Local Government Services, Department of Community Affairs, as the Bureau Chief for Fire Districts for 28 years. Most commissioners of fire districts are very cautious on the spending of your dollars. There is a two percent cap for the fire districts. Clarifying for the election date is the third Saturday in February. As for the election where you say you have no say, the budget process is a two way system. The budget is introduced prior to this year by December 17th. That budget is sent to Trenton where it is examined by members of the Division of Local Government Services to make sure they are within the cap and make sure there are no over expenditures as it is an oversight at the regulatory bureau. After the budget is adopted it comes back to the Fire District for a vote on the budget. If the decision to vote down the budget is made, the Township Committee prepares the budget. Usually there are very few changes made by the governing body. Whatever the decision, would like the audience to appreciate the time and effort.

Al Freeman, 29 Washington Way, spoke that the fire district and fire company are the same as it supplies the training and physical trucks that we have. The Township could afford a two percent cap that is coming. The County is putting a new radio system in, which will cost every fire company tens and thousands of dollars to supply these new radios. Our air packs are coming due in three years and each air pack is seven thousand dollars. Pumps, hoes and ladders have to be tested every year; firefighters have fit test physicals every year, vehicle maintenance using only emergency vehicle technicians; all which will be an expense if the Township wants to take over with their two percent cap. In reference to the company buying a rescue engine it is not true. We are buying a rescue body to hold equipment/tools.

Sean Vena, 27 Wicklow Drive, thanked Mayor and members of the Township Committee and spoke that as an individual who spearheaded the petition, I can tell you that residents embrace the elimination of this taxing authority in our town. I am convinced that I could have collected more signatures than the ones on this petition. I did not have to beg for them to sign. My interest is public safety. I do not take this dissolution of the fire district lightly, but I believe the Township Committee can manage the funds of this fire service better than them. The events over the last three years do not generate confidence in the fire district. The Township Committee has been very supportive of all emergency services of volunteers. You have a record of providing what is needed for our first responders to do the job. Now you must consider the benefit of eliminating the Fire District, the solicitor, secretary and auditor for the district. These functions are already done by the professionals contracted by the Township. This also means the elimination of the yearly election which are poorly attended by residents. You will be insuring the fire company equipment under the Burlington County JIF Insurance Fund. This has, in the past, saved the Township a considerable amount of money. This would probably match the purchase of a new fire truck to replace an 1800 gallon pumper. I acknowledge the residents approved by three votes at an amount not to exceed \$650,000 to purchase a new fire truck. But early on, Committeeman Barton questioned whether we can do better cost wise. As one is familiar with fire equipment and recent acquisitions in other towns, I believe we can. Finally, take a moment to consider the unpublicized facts that the fire district failed to capitalize on the instillation on a cell tower on the property of the fire house which would then be a saved funding source for many years because the fire district, to this day, is in violation of finance commission regulations. I could elaborate but the Township Committee had endured more aggravation with the fire district than I have time to put on the table. On behalf of those who signed this petition and all Tabernacle taxpayers, I urge you to dissolve the Fire District. In the process, saving taxpayers' dollars and beginning a new era of public safety for our residents. Thank you.

Don Beebe, 12 Hill Road, spoke about the signatures being collected during the senior dinner in the Fire Commissioner's building and that it was not fair.

Denise Panico, 46 Patty Bowker Road, spoke of being in favor of keeping the Fire District and appreciates the training they need to do a proper job. At this point, she urged the Township Committee to keep it in play.

Anthony Panico, 46 Patty Bowker Road, spoke about his house that burned down on April 28th and that he had called upon this fire department since 1986 (7) seven times. They respond incredibly quickly. A pumper had been dispatched to our house seven minutes before my wife made her 911 call because smoke was spotted in Medford. This is ridiculous that we had over \$400K of damage and the one opportunity that this board had to help us we were told something stupid on May 5th; to ask for tax reduction on our property. He was told that if it occurred before March 31st we could help you. This board has done nothing but takes away its leaf collection and raise taxes ever year. Your manipulation in the December 8th audit is crappy. We had six fire companies attend at our fire. I would rather have my tax dollars being guarded by ten people and not five.

Susan Gaskill, 23 Lakeview Drive, apologized as she came here tonight not knowing what any of this is about. I have more questions now than when I walked in the door. I do not think we should make a judgment of something like this without people like me knowing what is going on. Saturday morning I got a knock at the door asking me to sign a petition, I have no clue what this is about and up in the air trying to figure this out. Were there misappropriations of funds? Was there something troubling somewhere as to the reason why this is being considered? I know from my own personal experience that the fire service in this district is very good. Majority of this community does not know that this is going on. Mostly everyone is upset that this meeting is being held a week before Christmas. This is community service where these people volunteer, and you are going to fight over it. It does not make sense. Please hold off and try to get more information and make educated decision on this. There are a lot of emotions on both sides. I do not see disbanding something that seems to have worked since I have been here just because of a few people.

Cliff Toye, 29 Acorn Drive, spoke that he is pretty confused also but none of this is disparaging the volunteers. Everyone has the upmost respect for them. No matter how this turns out, there should be no effect on them and the job they do. One of the things of concern is that the vote was held on Columbus Day weekend. In the fire company building, they have an empty bay next to the voting spot. They are voting with written ballots in boxes that are seeing through. I have no idea who is looking over my shoulder, or the gentleman who was walking around behind me while I am filling out my ballot which was under advertised. This is not the way it is supposed to work. Why do we have a parade of fire trucks in the parking lot, is there a fire here tonight? No but this is a show of force, maybe. I do not expect to see any change in my tax rate but now I have a concern about two separate budgets and tax. To me we do not need more agencies in our pocket. Need fewer.

Andy Cunard, 42, Pine Cone Court, spoke of a previous issue that happened between this Board and the Fire Commission as he spoke of moving forward and spoke of the ambulance squad bringing this against the Fire Commission. It does not seem like we are moving forward to me. In regards to the mentioning of fiscal responsibility, the building next door is the biggest irresponsibility. The fire trucks are here because we are here, again to aid in our response if someone should need, not a show of force.

David G. Walker, 422 Pricketts Mill Road, spoke of being a member of the fire department for three years and echoed some of the things that were said of having the right tools, training and equipment at which the public has the chance to vote on it. What is wrong is the whole process needs to be looked at in terms of getting the vote out. Agree with both sides of the equation that not enough voters are present for these votes for the fire commission. Being a member of the fire department, I get to see how good the Commission is as stewards of your money because they do get an approved budget. If there is anything the fire department needs in terms of tools, training etc. when it is over a certain limit, the Commission must approve it. The Commission was thanked for being good stewards of my tax dollars. Be careful about abolishing the Commission that does have that extra oversight. It is the process that needs to be fixed for more voter turnout.

Sean McCausland, 346 Pricketts Mill Road, applauded three people in the room for being public safety experts and spoke about the firefighters needing the equipment to do training and questioned if the Township would be able to fund the firefighters without raising taxes at a two percent cap.

Jason Frake, 22 Lee Drive, spoke of being a firefighter and believes the audience that is for the Commission has done an excellent job and is one hundred percent for the Commission. Spoke of the circulated petition falsely misleading a lot of people. A lot of people need to be educated.

Cathy Crain, 60 Hawkin Road, spoke of her friend who lost her son a year ago. Both entities are needed, the EMTs and Volunteer Fire Company. The fight that has been going on has been going on way too long. It has been going on since before the new EMS building and it is a power struggle; it has been set forth in the shared service report that has been done by the State of New Jersey. Enough is enough! We need to act as one group as a unity, as a community and this fighting needs to stop. The power struggle needs to stop, and everyone needs to come together and work together.

Ann Lynd, 44 Richter Road, spoke that she rarely speaks at these meetings and wants everyone to know that she is not for dissolving the district and afraid that if we do our fire services will suffer. There is no way you can add another two percent to your tax rate to support the fire company. If we suffer we will lose property value. People who would like to come to Tabernacle may turn away, also our ISO ratings went up the last couple of years that saved some taxpayers on their home insurance. These are people who put time and effort into the fire company and everyone suffers. There is no way the Committee can raise the taxes to cover what they are covering out in the fire company. We cannot make people come out to vote no matter when the date is and

everyone will vote down if it will raise their taxes. I want my house to be safe and I want people to like this community and come into it. For that reason alone, I want to keep these Commissioners. Maybe we need another meeting because this is tough coming in now when it is Christmas time.

Tim Galvin, 37 Washington Way, spoke of this not being a personality conflict or about who does a terrific job with services, it is about a vote and duplicity and effort. I have one vote and believe in smaller government and would like to see use of content experts. Do not believe in separate budgets, we do not need extra controls and commissions.

Raymond McCarty, 368 Tuckerton Road, spoke about the many people in uniform that were in attendance and spoke about the individuals that get called away from their families out in cold weather to take risks. It is essential and fair that we help our neighbors as they help us. So it is difficult to talk about the dissolution of the Fire District without seeming to disrespect the fire fighters. To me the Fire District is some nebulous authority disconnected from the firefighters. Does not want this to be just another item on their budget, It is a complex thing in itself, not just a line item. I do not know if you are ready to cope with all the technicalities of a fire budget. I prefer that the fire district stay and thinks that any money or surplus that the fire company approves should stay under their control rather than being merged with general township funds. I would expect the committee to be general and understanding overseeing the fire function. The house you save, the life you save may be your own.

Kathy Burger, 18 Woodside Drive, spoke of working in government and has seen changes with towns going from volunteer to paid, to having volunteers in charge of things which is a concern as a tax payer. Right now we have a steady budget without the ups and down fluctuation with tax district for the fire. Concern if the Committee takes it over how our taxes are going to be affected. How is the Committee going to manage the fire district? We are very small and few departments. Are we ready under the current administration to take on another entity? Questions if the Township takes it over if we will start doing shared service in other towns to make us self-sufficient as we are doing with another entity in town. Also spoke of there being concern for people who do not realize when they can vote. Suggestion was made to vote with a mail-in ballot.

Leonard Rovisnisky, 4 Birch Drive (Southampton), spoke about information which can be found on the website and spoke about everybody being specialized and you cannot do it by doing it this way. The amount of money that you pay for the people that are running as the Board of Fire Commissioners they work for you 365 days of the year and they get one meal a year.

Mayor Lee thanked members of the public for taking time to come and address this issue with the Committee. It is a very sensitive issue for all of us and imperative for the Committee and has been at the forefront of a lot of discussions within our Committee. One of the things we are very sensitive of is the issue and how many different people it affects and the emotions involved. Our goal tonight is to absorb everything that we have heard from you. We will not be making any decision on the Fire Commission at this point. It is important for all of us to talk among ourselves and want the Committee to sleep on this for a couple of days. Regardless of what we do, moving forward as a community is something really important. All of us have a story about why we came to Tabernacle, why we moved here and why we continue to live here. It is important to recognize that no matter what happens or what we decide as a Committee, that we move forward together as a community and that we continue to be thankful for the Community we live in and for the volunteers that serve us, not only for the fire department but the Rescue Squad, TAA, etc. I am very privileged to be your Mayor and coming out tonight.

Closed to the public. Seeing no further comments from the public, Mayor closed public session.

Committeeman Barton thanked everyone for coming out and spoke of it being a festive season but this is business that we have to address. We will take a good hard look at this and hope to make the right decision for Tabernacle residents.

Committeeman Franzen spoke that there will be no winners and losers in what we end up deciding. This is going to be one of the most difficult things that this Committee has ever done when we address this issue. Being on this board for a while and residing in the Township for much longer, does not believe we have come across a situation where we are going to be forced to make a decision on something that really we cannot please everyone on this. I hope we recover from that and move on. We are a community of volunteers and do not want to lose focus. Hopefully six months from now this will all be a bad memory.

Committeewoman Brown spoke of it being a very difficult decision and we will do our homework. I will do my best to read everything to make the best uniformed decision.

Committeeman Yates spoke that there is truly nothing else to add. Sentiments reflect everything that his fellow Committee members spoke about. We are not making a decision tonight; this is not something that is easily decided on. There have been comments on both sides. I have heard the complaints, seen the conflicts back and forth and it is very disheartening that there is a petition to dissolve the district. It is disheartening that there is another petition to keep the fire district. How we deal, especially this time of the year, when it is supposed to be peace, joy, happiness and love. I am not looking forward to making a decision but you have elected me as one of your officials and I will do my best.

Mayor Lee added that if any one has any further comments, to submit them in writing by tomorrow 4pm. This is a very emotional time for everyone and we are taking it very seriously. Personally we have done a lot of thought and reflection; I can assure you as your Mayor that we will continue to do that over the next few weeks or days, to look at this issue. We appreciate the efforts that everyone has made to come out tonight to speak and listen.

Adjournment. Motion to adjourn was made by Ms. Brown, seconded by Mr. Barton.

Respectfully Submitted:

La Shawn R. Barber, RMC/CMR

Township Clerk

Approved: 02/24/2014