



WAYNE TOWNSHIP
of Marion County
Jeb Bardon, Trustee

An Open Letter to Wayne Township on a Potential Fire/EMS Merger

January 9, 2024

Fellow Wayne Township Residents,

Since being elected in 2022, I have worked hard to restore trust and confidence in the Office of the Wayne Township Trustee by being as transparent and open as possible. I have also looked for ways to reduce the property tax rates Wayne Township residents pay, which are among the highest in the state and 60 percent higher than our neighbors in other parts of the city. And that's why I am reaching out again today.

As you may recall, the prior Trustee was removed from office in a plea agreement with the Marion County Prosecutor and two previous Wayne Township Fire Chiefs also agreed to plea deals. All of them agreed to pay restitution to the Township as a part of their plea deals. To separate the Township from this leadership failure, I brought in an outside Fire Chief, Marc Reed, to help me. He has extensive outside experience as a career paramedic and firefighter. He has also served as a Fire Chief for other fire territories, most recently for six years at the City of Westfield.

In addition to addressing the leadership issues at the fire department, my new team and I have worked with the Indiana State Board of Accounts to audit the township's overall finances. Since 2022, Wayne Township government has gone through three different state audits, plus one federal audit.

In addition to the misuse of public funds related to the previous administration, these reviews also found a pattern of overspending at the Wayne Township Fire Department and an unsustainable business model that jeopardizes the Township's future. Unless we make serious changes, the Township's cash balance will go into the negative in 2025. This could force the township to borrow money for cash flow purposes or cut the services currently provided to our residents.

Over the last year I have taken numerous steps to address this looming crisis. We put in place systems to prevent future abuse. We hired outside legal and financial experts to create greater transparency and accountability. We have also found ways to cut costs by leaving positions open, switching outside vendors, creating new partnerships, and reducing some salaries. Our new Chief and his team combed through the Fire Department, looking for cost savings and restructuring opportunities.

Additionally, we have made the decision to no longer manage the Lion's Club Park in Clermont effective May 1, 2024. While it's a wonderful asset to our community, the Township can no longer afford the maintenance or insurance costs, nor the costs associated with employing a full-time, onsite park manager. The Clermont Lion's Club will resume management of their property, saving the Township more than \$40,000 each year.

Finally, we've tackled long-neglected projects that posed both safety and financial risks to Wayne Township, including removing underground fuel tanks that had been in the ground for more than twice their recommended lifespans, as well as replacing damaged and unsafe emergency generators, heating, and air filtration systems at our fire stations.

Yet, as we look ahead, even more difficult decisions must be made to ensure the Township's long-term financial stability. The costs of operating a standalone fire department and ambulance service, with millions of dollars in equipment, facilities, personnel, healthcare, pensions, and other items, will soon overtake the amount of taxes Wayne Township takes in to support fire and emergency protection. And, given Indiana's property tax caps and the fact that we already pay the **highest tax rate** allowed for these services, there are no good options.

That is why, at the January 11th meeting of the Wayne Township Advisory Board, we will introduce a resolution that would authorize us to begin formal negotiations with the City of Indianapolis to merge the township's fire department with the Indianapolis Fire Department. I will also ask the board to consider resolutions transferring medic services to the Indianapolis Emergency Medical Services (IEMS).

As outlined in Indiana law, the introduction of a fire department merger resolution starts a public comment period of at least 30 days (it may be longer), which must include a public hearing for residents to voice their comments. Following that period, the Township Board may hold a vote on a fire department merger resolution. The Township Board has their regular public meeting scheduled for February 22 at 6:00 p.m. and that would likely be when they hold the public hearing for public comment.

If approved, the resolution merging with the Indianapolis Fire Department (IFD) would go to the Indianapolis City-County Council, where it would be assigned to a committee for another round of public input before being considered by the full council. If passed by the full council, the resolution would then go to the Mayor for his signature. If at any point in the process an unresolvable issue arises, either the township or the city can walk away from negotiations and the fire merger would not happen.

The resolutions allowing Indianapolis Emergency Medical Services (IEMS) to take over the Township's ambulance services are much simpler and do not require City-County Council approval. If approved by the Wayne Township Board, it would only require an agreement between the two entities to transfer the EMS service. The board will take public testimony on this proposal at Thursday's meeting and could vote that same evening, or at a future meeting.

If these resolutions are approved by the board, my goal is to put in place measures that ensure a seamless transition for Wayne Township residents so they can continue to benefit from the world-class fire and emergency protections they have come to expect. Those include assuring the following:

- Emergency response times remain the same or improve in Wayne Township.
- All five Wayne Township existing fire stations remain open.
- Wayne Township fire stations remain fully equipped and staffed.
- All Wayne Township firefighters, civilian EMS, and other department staff are offered positions through IFD, the IEMS, or the City of Indianapolis with comparable pay, benefits, seniority, and rank.
- IFD continues our efforts to engage in the community, attending events, visiting schools and offering free trainings and educational classes throughout Wayne Township.

This process is not a new one. Five other townships in Marion County and the City of Beech Grove have all merged these services in recent years – and seen positive results. I am confident of the same result for Wayne Township. These moves will not only put the Township's finances back on solid ground but will improve the overall effectiveness of our fire and emergency services while lowering tax rates for Wayne Township residents.

Right now, residents who live in the Wayne Township Fire District pay the highest tax rates in the city for Fire Protection. **If the merger is approved, taxpayers would see their tax rate for fire protection decrease by as much as 64 percent.** This would be accomplished by eliminating duplicative costs and administrative structures between the two fire departments and emergency medical services.

I realize that change can be difficult, especially given how integral our fire service has been in our community, but it is the right thing to do for our citizens, for our community and our first responders. Affirming this is the fact that the **union representing Wayne Township Firefighters is overwhelmingly supportive of this merger, with more than 70 percent of their membership endorsing the move.**

We are still investigating all of the operational, financial, and practical implications of an eventual merger of both Fire and EMS. This proposal has come from a great deal of study and analysis, but is still an open question for the Township, its taxpayers, and the City of Indianapolis based on additional information that we continue to gather. I look forward to your written and public hearing input as we enter the public comment portion of this process. I thank you for your support and will keep you updated as this long process begins to unfold.

Sincerely,



Jeb Bardon
Trustee, Wayne Township