

FIRE COUNSEL NOTES



“Two Part Harmony or (perhaps) Disharmony”

By James S. Sinclair, IAFFPD Counsel
Stobbs & Sinclair, LTD

This issue’s Fire Counsel Notes is divided into two discreet, but perhaps interrelated, topics in the news.

Part 1: What Does The SJR 7 Task Force Report Tell Us?

This spring, the Report of the “Task Force on Recruiting & Retaining Public Employee Firefighters and Paramedics” which was created by Senate Joint Resolution 7 adopted in May 2023, was issued. The Task Force was comprised of 19 representatives from the legislature and emergency service organizations primarily in the area of fire service. Its charge was to examine the issues of recruitment and retention of firefighters and paramedics in Illinois.

The Report is interesting in that while it is predominantly a fire service directed undertaking, it is clear in reading the Report that issues involving emergency medical services became a predominant aspect of the Task Force’s focus on the issue of recruitment and retention. This is interesting because it demonstrates how significantly the fire service has been impacted by the problems communities in much of Illinois are facing in delivering adequate and timely emergency medical services (EMS) to their residents. For example, there is considerable discussion regarding requirements for paramedic status in firefighter hiring and recruitment. While the Report does focus on other topics related to firefighter recruitment such as reducing the age of eligibility to become a career (full time) firefighter from 21 to 18 years of age and adjustment of pension benefits for new full time

firefighters under the Pension Code Tier II rules, it lists as a primary issue in recruiting challenges in paramedic training programs and pass rates for EMS training under the National Registry Paramedic Exam. The examination of this topic and the Report’s focus on it reflects that, in the Illinois fire service today, EMS is a major issue.

The Report contains information regarding comparative pass rates in 5 states, including Illinois, on the National Registry Paramedic Exam. It also shows the initial pass rate in Illinois on the national exam from 2013 to 2025. While the Report also discusses issues such as financial assistance for firefighter training (MAP Grants); easing the transition of military personnel to the fire service; reviewing the manner by which full time firefighters are hired under the current provisions in the Fire Protection District Act and the Municipal Code; and encouraging the Office of the State Fire Marshal to revise the mechanism by which a firefighter from another state can become certified in Illinois, it is clear from reading the Report that an overarching issue in the fire service today is its involvement in EMS to a much greater degree than in the past. This is not surprising as more and more not for profit and private ambulance providers reduce or end emergency ambulance service in many parts of Illinois with the result that communities have turned to the fire departments of

Illinois, whether fire protection district or municipal or career or noncareer (part time, volunteer, POC etc.), to provide this essential service. In many cases this may mean adding an emergency medical responder (first responder) program to the fire department’s operations which means becoming part of an EMS system under the direction of a medical director, resource hospital, and the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH). In other cases, fire departments have added full EMS ambulance transport to their operations with a requirement that their firefighters have an EMT or paramedic licensure. All of this has occurred against the backdrop of declining EMS and ambulance service from other sources and it has placed a strain on the fire service at all levels and on both the career and noncareer sides of the fire service. This aspect is one which will, at some point, have to be addressed if both adequate fire/rescue services and EMS are to be provided in many areas of the state.

The SJR 7 Report also examined and presented limited statistics giving examples of the decline in the number of firefighters in 3 of the 5 top states in firefighter numbers between 2019 and 2023. And, in what the Report labelled a “random sample” of 3 locations in Illinois, the Report reflects the precipitous decline in applications to become a firefighter as

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shown in the selected locations where the decline in applications has ranged from 88% to 100%.

What has changed? At the top of the Report's list of reasons is a lack of accredited paramedic training programs and the challenges presented to individuals in the accreditation and approval of such programs (EMS again!). This was followed by the difficulties experienced by volunteer firefighters and EMTs in finding time to train. The Report next identifies as a cause the reduction in career firefighter pensions under Article 4 of the Pension Code based on the state's Tier 1/Tier 2 system. This was followed by the minimum age requirement for full time firefighters (21) which impedes entry into the fire service directly from high school and fire service programs offered by community colleges. Beyond these "top 3" hurdles, the Report goes on to identify two "Additional Obstacles," both of which are EMS related: confusion regarding regional approval of EMS training programs and low pass rates on the National Registry Paramedic Exam. Again, what comes through? Arguably, that a good part of the recruitment and retention problem may be the result of the fire service in Illinois becoming more deeply involved in EMS and less focused on traditional fire service functions of fire prevention, fire suppression, and rescue services. A question which comes through is whether the fire service in Illinois, in stepping into the vacuum left by the departure of traditional non-fire related EMS providers, has itself exacerbated the problem of recruiting and retaining firefighters.

The Report concludes by making 4 Recommendations to address the problem retention and recruiting problem:

#1 Streamline Certification Processes and remove barriers for Firefighters.

#2 Address Disparities in Retirement Benefits.

#3 Streamline Paramedic Licensing and Program Approval Processes.

#4 Explore Regionalization for Efficiency.

There are suggestions offered in the Report to address each of these four points, but it is fair to say that a good part of the recommendations are aimed at EMS issues.

It is also notable that the Report's last recommendation returns to an oft heard recommendation that "regionalization of fire protection agencies to optimize resource sharing" be considered. Translation: consolidation. As these issues continue to fester in the fire service, fire protection districts will need to be prepared to assess and recognize that consolidation will be seen as a needed step in the fire service. District boards need to be thinking about how they will address consolidation if it comes "a-knocking" by legislation from the General Assembly or local pressure caused by lack of personnel and financial resources to operate a functional fire department and the provision of emergency medical services.

Readers desiring to read the full Report, which includes a case study based on a nationwide program in Finland related to fire and rescue services consolidation and the minutes of the Task Force meetings should be able to access it at the following link: <https://sfm.illinois.gov/about/boardscommissions/recruiting---retaining-public-firefighters-and-paramedi.html> in "2026."

Part 2: Should Illinois Fire Protection Districts Look For An Alternative Funding Source?

A recent election in three counties around St. Louis, Missouri involving fire protection districts gives rise to a question for districts in Illinois: Given the opposition to property taxes, is it time to look seriously for an alternative to real estate taxes to fund fire protection districts? Pursuant to legislation passed by the Missouri General Assembly in 2025, fire protection and ambulance districts in St. Louis County, St. Charles County, and Jefferson County in Missouri were authorized to place on the ballot in the April election in those counties a proposition to replace a portion of the real estate tax fire districts in those counties levy to support their operations with a 1% sales tax. Districts obtaining approval from the voters for the sales tax will be required to reduce their property

tax levies in future years by up to one-half, but, if the sales tax revenues do not replace all of the property tax reduction, the districts will be able to raise their property tax levies to recoup the shortfall. Some 38 fire protection districts located in the three counties placed the sales tax question on the ballot in the recent April election. Of those, voters in 18 districts approved the sales tax. The propositions fared best in St. Louis County where the proposition passed in 14 of 20 districts, while in the other two counties, the proposition passed in only 4 of the 18 districts. Press accounts gave differing possible reasons for the disparity in results, but one reason given is that the proposals were strongly supported by the firefighters' labor union in St. Louis County. Proponents argued that the replacement of a substantial part of the real estate tax by a sales tax was a way to generate more revenue from persons who do not live in a district, but who use its emergency services when they are in the district. Sales taxes are generally considered to be a more "regressive" form of tax (meaning that the burden of the tax is greater on lower income persons) than the real estate tax, but they tend to be dependent on the amount of taxable retail activity in the district which can fluctuate with the condition of the economy. As retail sales grow with more economic activity, sales tax revenues rise giving more financial support to the local government to fund its operations. Conversely, when the economy is in recession and retail sales fall or go flat, revenues from sales tax can decline rather precipitously. Real estate taxes, on the other hand, remain generally more stable, but, as demonstrated during and following the 2008 Great Recession, they can go flat or decline as property values fall due to the recession in the economy. Combining financial support from both taxes could be viewed as a better method than reliance solely on one revenue source as is now the case for fire protection districts in Illinois. One press report estimated that the districts where the sales tax proposition passed could be looking to receive as much as \$100 million in additional revenue in 2027, a year before any real estate tax reductions would go into effect.

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While Illinois does have, at the county level, authority for a public safety tax which, like the measure in Missouri, is a sales tax, the Illinois version, because it is collected and distributed by county government, rather than taxing bodies like fire protection districts directly, has generally been skewed to law enforcement in the few counties where it has been approved by voters. (55 ILCS 5/5-1006.5) The Missouri approach, if adopted in Illinois, would be a major departure from local government finance for units of local government like fire protection districts. Even though municipalities have had limited sales tax authority for a long period of time, specialized units

of local government have not. Given the opposition to real estate taxes in Illinois, one wonders whether the Missouri approach warrants a closer look as an alternative to provide financial support for essential government services like fire protection districts. On the other hand, given the opposition in the Illinois General Assembly to any form of higher local tax propositions, whether such a proposition could gain sufficient support from legislators to be seriously considered is questionable. Perhaps, however, if a real estate tax offset were made part of the plan, who knows?

Conclusion

So how do these two seemingly disparate topics relate to each other? Quite simply, it is clear that, to a significant

degree, many of the issues raised by the SJR 7 Task Force Report are tied to money and the cost of providing what is becoming a major financial burden for fire protection districts in the state: emergency medical services—EMS. It is simply a reality that operating an EMS service on a volunteer basis is not viable. On the other hand, as EMS is pushed further into the fire service operations, the cost of personnel to operate a viable EMS system often exceeds what property taxes and ambulance service call revenues will supply. An alternative funding model may be in order. Something for districts to think about and perhaps put to their state representatives and senators the next time they see them.

Take care and good luck! ■

IAFPD's Open Meeting Act (OMA) Training LIVE WEBINAR July 16, 2026, 4:00 – 6:00 pm

Presented by: David Livingstone

Chief of the Civil Division, Madison County State's Attorney's Office

- Developed specially for Fire Protection Districts
- Meeting the State training requirements for local government officials who need to complete the training (90 days from taking office)
- Presented by experienced legal professional

Public Act 1000-1127 authorizes the IAFPD to provide the required by Section 1.05 of the Open Meetings Act for all trustees of fire protection districts. This program is directed more specifically for fire districts and serves as an alternative to the existing online training through the Illinois Attorney General's website. IAFPD's OMA training gives newly appointed or elected trustees the opportunity to meet their Open Meetings Act training requirement in via live webinar meeting format. You may ask questions! Trustees who have completed the 12-hour ETT program will earn 2 CE hours by participating in this program.

Program participants can expect:

- An overview of OMA Compliance
- Background and legal requirements for an open meeting and closed meetings
- Applicability of the Act to public bodies
- Procedures and requirements regarding quorums, notice, and recordkeeping
- Violation penalties and other consequences
- Examples of Agendas, Minutes, Motions
- A Quick Guide to the Open Meetings Act (resource)
- 2 CE credits for those who have completed the Essential Trustee Training program

About Our Presenter: **David Livingstone** received his bachelor's degree in criminal justice –Legal Studies Emphasis; Political Science; and Public Administration from Lindenwood University in St. Charles, Mo., before earning his Juris Doctor from Saint Louis University School of Law, focusing on civil litigation. During law school, he was a law clerk at Stobbs, Sinclair & Associates and later became a partner of the firm where he practiced for several years before becoming chief of the Civil Division at the Madison County State's Attorney's office. He continues to be a valued supporter and presenter of IAFPD programs throughout the year.

