

Regional Fire Services Study

Ambler Borough, Lower Gwynedd Township, North Wales Borough,
and Upper Gwynedd Township
Montgomery County, PA

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Executive Summary

This regionalization study for Ambler Borough, North Wales Borough, Upper Gwynedd Township, and Lower Gwynedd Township evaluates opportunities to enhance fire and emergency services through collaborative planning, shared resources, and potential organizational integration among the four municipalities. The study's purpose is to ensure that high-quality, sustainable, and efficient fire protection continues to be delivered in a manner that meets current and future community needs.

Each participating municipality currently maintains independent volunteer or combination fire departments that serve their respective jurisdictions. While each agency demonstrates strong community commitment, leadership, and tradition, increasing service demands, recruitment and retention challenges, fiscal pressures, and operational overlaps have prompted a collective interest in exploring regional approaches. This study analyzes operational performance, response times, staffing models, financial considerations, governance options, and cultural factors influencing regionalization.

The findings indicate that a coordinated, regionalized fire service model could improve response coverage, standardize training and operational procedures, and optimize resource allocation while reducing duplication of effort. Collaborative governance and joint administrative frameworks would support long-term sustainability and allow for consistent service delivery across municipal boundaries.

Key benefits of regionalization include:

- Enhanced operational efficiency and interoperability among participating departments.
- Improved response times through optimized station deployment and staffing coordination.
- Standardized training, safety practices, and performance expectations.
- Shared fiscal responsibility and potential cost savings through collective purchasing and apparatus planning.
- Strengthened volunteer recruitment, retention, and leadership development through unified programming.

While the transition to a regional model requires careful planning, stakeholder engagement, and cultural alignment, the participating municipalities possess a solid foundation for collaboration. Their shared commitment to public safety and community service provides the foundation for success.

The study concludes that regionalization among Ambler Borough, North Wales Borough, Upper Gwynedd Township, and Lower Gwynedd Township represents a proactive and strategic approach to ensuring that fire protection services remain resilient, responsive, and sustainable for years to come.

Introduction: Objectives & Study Design

A request for technical assistance was submitted to the Department of Community and Economic Development, Governor's Center for Local Government Services, to carry out an assessment to objectively evaluate the feasibility of regionalizing the fire service delivery for the municipalities of Upper Gwynedd Township, Lower Gwynedd Township, Ambler Borough, and North Wales Borough, Montgomery County, PA. The goal is to decide whether merging the three volunteer fire companies into a single regional department would improve public safety, fire service delivery, provide cost-effectiveness, and address long-term challenges. This report aims to provide stakeholders, including

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municipal officials, fire department leadership, and community members with a comprehensive written analysis and actionable recommendations.

The "*Regional Fire Study for Ambler Borough, North Wales Borough, Upper Gwynedd Township, and Lower Gwynedd Township*" was conducted by retired Fire Chief Derrick Sawyer, EFO, serving in his capacity as a Fire Services Peer Consultant. Chief Sawyer was assigned to fulfill the scope of services mutually agreed upon with the municipality. Additional responsibilities included conducting a thorough evaluation of existing fire service operations and preparing a detailed report of his findings. The report, containing both observations and strategic recommendations, was submitted to the Governor's Center, the township's governing body, and the three volunteer fire service organizations.

The principal contacts are as follows:

Sandra Zadell, Township Manager
Eric Geiger, CFO, Chief
Matt Traynor, Chief
Jay Leadbeater, Chief
Connor McCann, Fire Marshal
Amanda Hoade, Chief Engineer & Board of Trustees President
Bill Clark, Deputy Chief
John Leadbeater, Deputy Chief
Nick Seigenfuse, Captain
Brad Taylor, Captain
Alex Wilson, Lieutenant

In addition to the kick-off meeting to define the scope of services with representatives from the municipality and the three fire companies, fire station visits were conducted to determine the current level of service being provided to the residents of the above-mentioned municipalities.

Objectives

- Improve Public Safety Outcomes
 - Enhance emergency response capabilities.
 - Reduce response times to align with NFPA 1720 standards.
 - Strengthen service delivery through coordinated staffing and equipment deployment.

- Operational Efficiency
 - Eliminate service redundancies.
 - Optimize resource allocation (apparatus, personnel, facilities).
 - Establish shared training, maintenance, and administrative functions.

- Fiscal Responsibility
 - Identify cost-saving opportunities through shared services.
 - Assess capital and operational cost implications of regionalization.
 - Evaluate long-term financial sustainability.

- Governance and Management
 - Explore governance structures for a regionalized department.
 - Clarify accountability, oversight, and service level agreements.
 - Maintain local representation and stakeholder input.
- Community Engagement and Support
 - Ensure transparency and education about potential changes.
 - Solicit stakeholder feedback including residents, firefighters, and municipal leaders.
 - Build community trust in the regional fire service model.

Emphasis On Risk and Sustainability

This section evaluates the potential risks and sustainability challenges associated with the current fire service delivery model and the transition to a regionalized system. It aims to support informed decision-making by identifying threats to service continuity, community trust, and organizational viability, while highlighting opportunities to improve long-term resilience.

1. Strategic Risks

Risk Area	Description	Potential Impact	Mitigation Strategy
Governance Fragmentation	Multiple jurisdictions with differing policies and priorities	Decision paralysis; uneven service delivery	Establish intergovernmental agreement with a regional board
Loss of Local Identity	Perceived loss of local fire department identity post-regionalization	Community resistance; loss of volunteer engagement	Include branding and local representation in governance design
Stakeholder Resistance	Resistance from fire company leadership, municipal boards, or residents	Delayed or blocked implementation	Transparent communication; stakeholder engagement plan

2. Operational Risks

Risk Area	Description	Potential Impact	Mitigation Strategy
Volunteer Decline	Continued decline in active volunteers due to aging, burnout, or disinterest	Reduced staffing capacity; increased response times	Regional recruitment program and incentives
Dispatch/Interoperability	Incompatible communication and	Response delays; coordination failures	Invest in unified CAD, radio systems, and

	dispatch systems between departments		mutual aid protocols
Apparatus Reliability	Aging fleet and deferred capital investment	Vehicle failure; safety risk	Regional apparatus replacement schedule

3. Financial Risks

Risk Area	Description	Potential Impact	Mitigation Strategy
Capital Cost Burden	Cost of upgrading facilities, equipment, and technology	Financial strain on individual municipalities	Shared capital funding formula; phased investment plan
Inequitable Cost Allocation	Disagreement over cost-sharing formulas across municipalities	Political friction; funding instability	Use data-driven formulas based on call volume, population, assessed value
Revenue Volatility	Dependence on grants, fundraising, or inconsistent municipal support	Budget shortfalls; deferred maintenance	Diversify funding sources; explore service fees or regional tax base

4. Sustainability Considerations

Dimension	Current Challenge	Regionalization Opportunity
Workforce	Aging volunteer force; limited staffing pool	Create shared staffing model, including part-time or paid positions
Training & Professional Development	Uneven training standards; limited capacity for specialized training	Develop regional training center or shared certification program
Facilities and Infrastructure	Redundant stations and underused space	Consolidate into strategically located, modern facilities
Apparatus Lifecycle Management	Disjointed replacement schedules; aging fleet	Centralized procurement and lifecycle planning
Environmental Resilience	Aging infrastructure not designed for climate adaptation	Invest in energy-efficient, flood-resistant, and resilient facilities

Summary: Risk & Sustainability Assessment Matrix

Category	Current Risk	Regionalization Benefit
Governance	Fragmented leadership	Coordinated decision-making and strategic oversight
Operations	Volunteer decline; equipment gaps	Shared resources and standardized protocols
Finance	Redundant spending; inconsistent revenues	Economies of scale and more predictable funding

Facilities	Redundancy and maintenance backlog	Optimization of assets and reduced long-term costs
Service Quality	Inconsistent training and uneven response	Uniform service levels and professional standards

Scope

The purpose of this report is to conduct a comprehensive, data-informed evaluation of the fire and emergency service delivery systems across Ambler, North Wales, Upper Gwynedd, and Lower Gwynedd. The study aims to assess the feasibility, benefits, risks, and pathways of service sharing or full regionalization to improve public safety outcomes, ensure operational efficiency, and enhance long-term sustainability.

Geographic Scope

This report encompasses the following four municipalities in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania:

- Ambler Borough
- North Wales Borough
- Upper Gwynedd Township
- Lower Gwynedd Township

Together, these jurisdictions represent a diverse mix of suburban and borough communities with varying densities, hazards, and service delivery models.

Organizational Scope

The fire service providers examined in this report include:

- Wissahickon Fire Company (serving Ambler and Lower Gwynedd)
- North Penn Volunteer Fire Company (serving North Wales Lower Gwynedd, and Upper Gwynedd)
- Upper Gwynedd Fire Department (volunteer department serving Upper Gwynedd)

Other entities involved in emergency response coordination, including mutual aid partners and Montgomery County dispatch, were considered, when relevant to interoperability and automatic aid planning.

Analytical Scope

- Community Risk Assessment (NFPA 1300 / 1730-aligned):
 - Structural fire, EMS, hazmat, natural hazard, and special risk analysis.
 - Identification of vulnerable populations and risk-based demand forecasting.
- Fire Department Operational Assessment:
 - Response time analysis.
 - Staffing, training, facilities, and apparatus review.
 - Compliance with NFPA standards, ISO ratings, and best practices.
- Service Delivery Models:
 - Comparison of status quo, service sharing, and full regionalization.

- Cost-benefit analysis of shared services and regional governance models.
- Financial Analysis:
 - Budget and expenditure trends.
 - Apparatus lifecycle planning.
 - Cost-sharing frameworks and long-term capital planning needs.
- Governance and Legal Considerations:
 - Options for intergovernmental agreements or the formation of a regional authority.
 - Recommendations for implementation, accountability, and public engagement.

Limitations

- This report does not include a full engineering assessment of individual facilities.
- EMS agencies (BLS/ALS transport) are considered only in relation to fire department support roles.
- The study is based on the best available data at the time of analysis, including municipal records, interviews, and station visits.

Methodology

The methodology combined quantitative data analysis, e.g., call volumes, response times, and financial trends, with qualitative insights from those currently serving in each organization. All four communities' demographic and risk profiles were considered, as well as the legal and financial framework governing volunteer fire companies in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Phase 1: Baseline Assessment

- Data Collection.
- Departmental statistics (calls for service, response times, staffing).
- Budgetary and financial records (FY2020 - 2024).
- Apparatus and facilities inventories.
- ISO ratings and NFPA compliance evaluations.
- Stakeholder Interviews.
- Fire Chiefs, municipal managers, elected officials, and volunteer leadership.
- Site Visits.
- On-site evaluations of fire stations and apparatus.
- Observation of operational protocols and mutual aid practices.

Phase 2: Comparative Analysis

- Benchmarking.
- Regional and national comparisons to similar jurisdictions.
- Evaluation of alternative service delivery models and regionalized systems.
- Gap Analysis.
- Identification of service, resource, and infrastructure gaps.
- Evaluation of alignment with NFPA 1720 and ISO Public Protection Classification standards.

Phase 3: Strategic Modeling

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- Scenario Development.
- Service sharing, contracting, and full regionalization models.
- Cost-benefit analysis for each option.
- Risk and Sustainability Assessment
- Assessment of long-term risks, including financial volatility, volunteer availability, and infrastructure needs.

Phase 4: Recommendations and Implementation Planning

- Synthesis of Findings.
- Key themes from data, interviews, and stakeholder feedback.
- Final Deliverables.
- Regionalization roadmap.
- Governance and cost-sharing frameworks.
- Communication strategies for public engagement.

Community Background: The municipalities in question lie in central Montgomery County, a suburban region of about 880,000 residents (the third-most populous county in Pennsylvania). Montgomery County relies predominantly on volunteer fire services. There are over ninety (90) fire companies countywide, coordinated through a county 9-1-1 dispatch. The Public Protection Classification (ISO rating) for these communities is in the mid-range (typically Class 4 or 5 on the 1-10 scale, with 1 being best), reflecting generally good fire protection infrastructure (e.g. ample hydrants and modern apparatus) but also the limitations of an all-volunteer response. All four municipalities are characterized by mixed residential and commercial development, and they experience low fire incident rates and robust fire prevention codes. Nonetheless, like much of Pennsylvania, they face a decline in volunteer firefighters compared to decades past, prompting local leaders to explore innovative fire service delivery models.

In summary, this study sets out to determine whether a regional fire department can enhance emergency response capabilities and sustainability for Upper Gwynedd, Lower Gwynedd, Ambler, and North Wales. The following sections present an overview of each municipality, a deep dive into the current state of each fire company, analysis of operations, the pros and cons of consolidation, and detailed recommendations for moving forward.

Municipal Overview

The four municipalities in this study are all located in the greater North Penn/Ambler area of Montgomery County, relatively near each other (forming a contiguous block, with North Wales Borough encircled by Upper Gwynedd Township). They share socio-economic ties and often rely on each other's emergency services through mutual aid agreements. A regional fire service would build upon already existing interdependence. Below is a brief profile of each community.

Lower Gwynedd Township

Lower Gwynedd Township is a suburban township of approximately 12,100 residents spread over 9.3 square miles. The township is primarily residential (ranging from older neighborhoods to newer upscale

developments), with significant commercial and institutional presence in areas like Spring House and along Bethlehem Pike. Notable risks in Lower Gwynedd include several corporate office parks (pharmaceutical and biotech firms), a hospital annex, and Gwynedd Mercy University. The township is affluent and has invested in infrastructure. Fire hydrants are available in most developed areas, aiding fire suppression efforts. Lower Gwynedd's Public Protection Classification is Class 4. The township benefits from good water supply and two fire stations within its borders (WFC's substation and coverage by NPVFC in the northwest) but is impacted by the challenges of volunteer response times.

Fire service in Lower Gwynedd is provided by two volunteer companies under a long-standing arrangement. The Wissahickon Fire Company (Station 7) has primary responsibility for the southern and eastern parts of the township, while the North Penn Volunteer Fire Company (Station 62) covers the northern and western section. This split is roughly along Evans Road/Plymouth Road as a boundary. The township does not have its own municipal fire department. Instead, it financially contributes to both volunteer companies and appoints a Fire Marshal to handle code enforcement and fire prevention. Lower Gwynedd's elected Board of Supervisors is attuned to fire service issues. For instance, a 2019 township newsletter explicitly discussed fire company call volumes and the need for support, noting that WFC responded to 612 calls in the prior year (262 of them in Lower Gwynedd) and NPVFC to 332 calls (109 in Lower Gwynedd). This indicates that on average one or more fire incidents occur in the township each day, heavily weighted toward automatic alarms and gas odor investigations. The township's key concern is ensuring adequate daytime coverage as volunteer availability dwindles. Lower Gwynedd is supportive of exploring a regional solution if it means more reliable service and an equitable sharing of resources.

Upper Gwynedd Township

Upper Gwynedd Township is a neighboring township covering about 17,000 residents across 8.1 square miles. The community is a mix of residential subdivisions, large industrial facilities, and open space. A defining feature is Merck & Company pharmaceutical plant in West Point, which possesses a massive campus that is one of the region's largest employers' and a significant hazard site (with laboratories, manufacturing, and chemical storage). Upper Gwynedd also has busy commercial corridors (like Sumneytown Pike) and institutional risks such as schools and senior living facilities. The township is fully covered by public water and hydrants, and as such, retains a favorable fire insurance rating.

Fire protection in Upper Gwynedd is provided by West Point Volunteer Fire Company, which the township renamed Upper Gwynedd Township Fire Department (UGTFD). Upper Gwynedd Township Fire Department (Station 80) is the sole designated fire company for the township. It operates from a single main station on Garfield Avenue in the West Point section of the township. Upper Gwynedd's governing body is notably proactive in supporting its fire service. The township directly owns major apparatus and provides an annual operating subsidy, and the Fire Marshal works closely with the volunteer fire company leadership. The result is that UGTFD is among the better-funded volunteer companies in the region, with relatively new apparatus and equipment. The ISO rating for Upper Gwynedd is Class 3. In recent years, Upper Gwynedd has seen steady growth in call demand. In 2022 the fire company responded to 482 calls, which jumped to 568 calls in 2023. Roughly 20% - 25% of their calls are medical assists (Quick Response Service (QRS) first responder calls), as UGTFD is certified to answer certain EMS calls to render first aid until an ambulance arrives. The remainder are fire, rescue, and alarm incidents. The township's Board of Commissioners has expressed interest in

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any initiative that can bolster daytime response and long-term volunteer recruitment, including regional partnerships. Upper Gwynedd officials will, however, ensure that any cost-sharing in a regional department recognizes the township's significant current investment (they recently purchased a new ladder truck and engine in 2021 for the fire company, for example). The community expects high-quality service and has a history of supporting fire safety (adopting modern codes, requiring fire sprinklers in many new buildings). A successful consolidation would be needed to maintain or improve Upper Gwynedd's current service performance metrics.

Ambler Borough

Ambler is a small borough (approximately 6,800 residents in 1.5 square miles) with an urban character and rich history. It serves as a commercial and social hub for the surrounding townships. Ambler's downtown is dense with restaurants, shops, multi-story mixed-use buildings, and historic brick structures. The borough also has several mid-rise residential complexes and the remnants of old industrial sites (Ambler was once known for a large asbestos manufacturing plant). These features mean that Ambler presents a concentrated set of fire risks: older construction (some without sprinklers), closely spaced buildings, and high occupancy use. On the positive side, Ambler has a complete municipal water system with hydrants on virtually every block. Additionally, its small geography means short travel distances for fire units. Ambler's fire protection has been provided by the Wissahickon Fire Company for over 130 years. WFC's primary station is centrally located on Race Street in the borough, enabling quick deployment throughout the town.

Ambler Borough's government (a mayor and borough council) relies on Wissahickon Fire Company as an external entity. The borough provides an annual contribution and relief funding but does not manage operations. The ISO rating for Ambler is Class 4, reflecting excellent water supply and adequate fire company capabilities, tempered by volunteer staffing limitations. Wissahickon Fire Co. proudly reports protecting 16,500 people in a ten (10) square-mile area, including Ambler and much of Lower Gwynedd. This indicates that WFC is responsible for not only the borough's residents but also thousands in the township, a dual role that keeps it busy. In 2018, WFC responded to 612 incidents (the highest of any company in this consortium). A majority (over 50%) of those calls were alarms (false/active) and another ~10% were gas leaks or wires down, which are common in an older town with many alarmed properties. Fires and rescues do occur, and WFC has managed notable fire incidents in Ambler's downtown area where its quick response averted major conflagrations. The fire company's membership is all-volunteer, but it is one of the larger companies in the area with 65+ active firefighters on its roster (including interior firefighters, fire police, and support members). These volunteers are highly trained. All new members undertake 200+ hours of firefighter training at the academy, and many choose to pursue advanced certifications in vehicle rescue and high-angle rescue. In fact, WFC specializes in technical rescue disciplines (trench, confined space, collapse rescue and more) and is a member of a regional task force for large-scale incidents. For the Ambler community, fire service identity is deeply tied to WFC, which has been a pillar of the town since 1891. Therefore, any consolidation plan must respect Ambler's sense of ownership of "their" fire company, even as it seeks to merge it into a larger entity.

North Wales Borough

North Wales is a small borough of about 3,400 residents in under one square mile. Geographically, it is surrounded by Upper Gwynedd Township, functioning as a “donut hole” municipality. North Wales is primarily residential with a quaint main street and some multi-family housing. Its housing stock is older Victorian and early-20th-century homes on narrow streets. The borough has municipal water and hydrants, and its compact size means response distances are short. Fire protection in North Wales has been provided by the North Penn Volunteer Fire Company since 1888, making it another long-established institution. NPVFC’s station is centrally located on S. Main Street, North Wales, and the company not only serves the borough but also has a first-due area into parts of the surrounding townships (particularly the western portion of Lower Gwynedd). The company is 100% volunteer and has historically operated a social club and banquet hall in conjunction with the fire service (a customary practice in PA to help fund operations).

North Wales Borough’s government supports NPVFC with an annual allocation, but given the borough’s small tax base, it relies on the company’s own fundraising and neighboring municipalities’ contributions to keep it running. North Wales’ fire incident load is moderate. Many calls are mutual aid or outside the borough. In 2018, North Penn FC responded to 332 calls in total, of which only 109 were within Lower Gwynedd and the rest were in North Wales and other areas. By 2023, call volume had doubled to the mid-600s annually. The company added a Quick Response Service (QRS) for medical emergencies, significantly increasing call volume. For example, internal records indicate NPVFC responded to ~653 calls in 2023, about half of which were fire-related and half medical QRS calls (first-responder medical assists). This uptick demonstrates both the growing demand and NPVFC’s commitment to broadening its service. The volunteers at North Penn are well-trained (all active firefighters attain certification, and Monday night drills are a tradition across all these companies). As is recommended in this study, NPVFC currently dispatches neighboring companies on all levels of emergencies. The dispatch consists of two engines, a rescue squad, a ladder, a QRS vehicle, a traffic unit, and two support vehicles. North Penns ladder truck is regularly relied upon by neighboring jurisdictions. The tight-knit North Wales community holds its fire company in high esteem, and borough officials will only endorse consolidation if it clearly improves local service. They worry about losing their distinctive touch and rapid local response that their fire company provides. Ensuring that a regional department maintains a station and presence in North Wales will be a key point for this community.

Table: Summary of Key Community Metrics and Fire Service

Municipality	Population (2020)	Area (sq. mi)	Fire Stations	Annual Calls (recent)	Primary Fire Company (Station)
Lower Gwynedd Twp	~12,100	9.3	2	~272 (WFC in 2023)	Wissahickon & North Penn (split)
Upper Gwynedd Twp	~17,100	8.1	1	568 (2023)	Upper Gwynedd (Station 80)
Ambler Borough	~6,800	1.5	1	~600 (est. 2022)	Wissahickon (Station 7, main)
North Wales Borough	~3,400	0.6	1	653 (2023) <i>incl. EMS</i>	North Penn (Station 62)

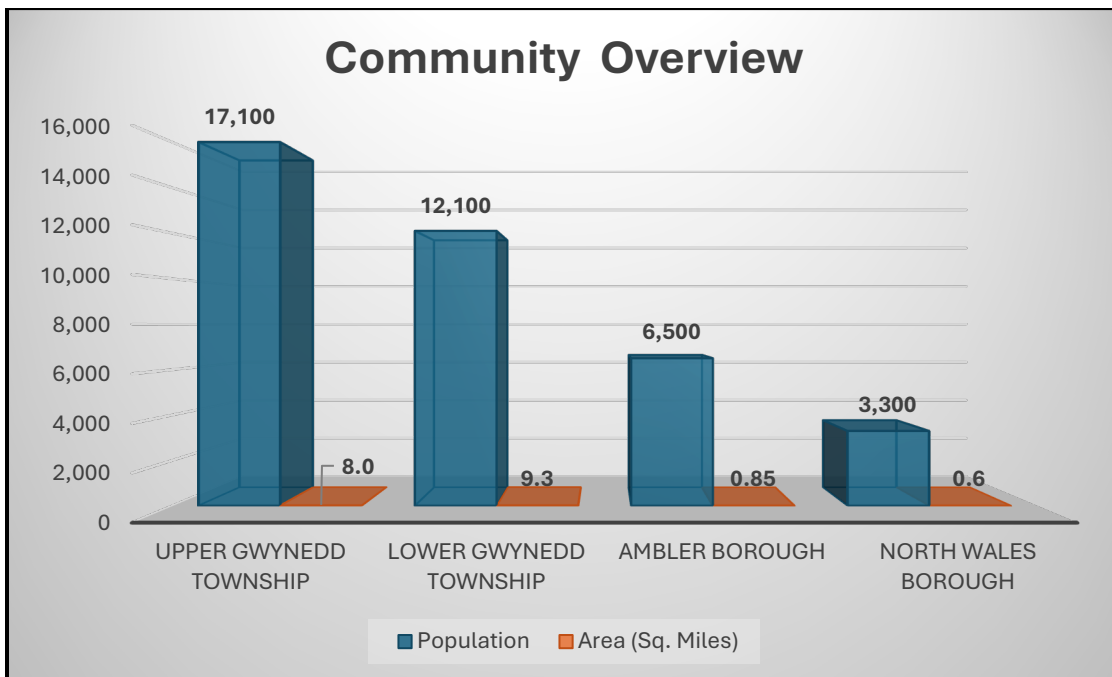
(Sources: U.S. Census. municipal records and fire company reports)

This table underscores the distribution of resources: five stations serve the combined area of ~20 sq. miles with ~39,000 population, handling 1,500 - 1,800 incidents per year in aggregate (as of 2023). The next sections delve into the details of each fire department’s operations and capabilities. **Note:** North Penn Volunteer Fire Company does not report incident response by jurisdiction.

Combined Community Overview

This section provides a demographic and geographic summary of the municipalities included in the regionalization study. Understanding population distribution, land area, and population density is critical to designing equitable and efficient fire service delivery models.

Municipality	Population	Area (sq. miles)	Population Density (people/sq. mile)
Upper Gwynedd Township	17,100	8.00	2,000
Lower Gwynedd Township	12,100	9.30	1,301
Ambler Borough	6,500	0.85	7,647
North Wales Borough	3,300	0.60	5,500



Key Observations

- Upper Gwynedd Township is the largest municipality by population and area, serving as a regional anchor.

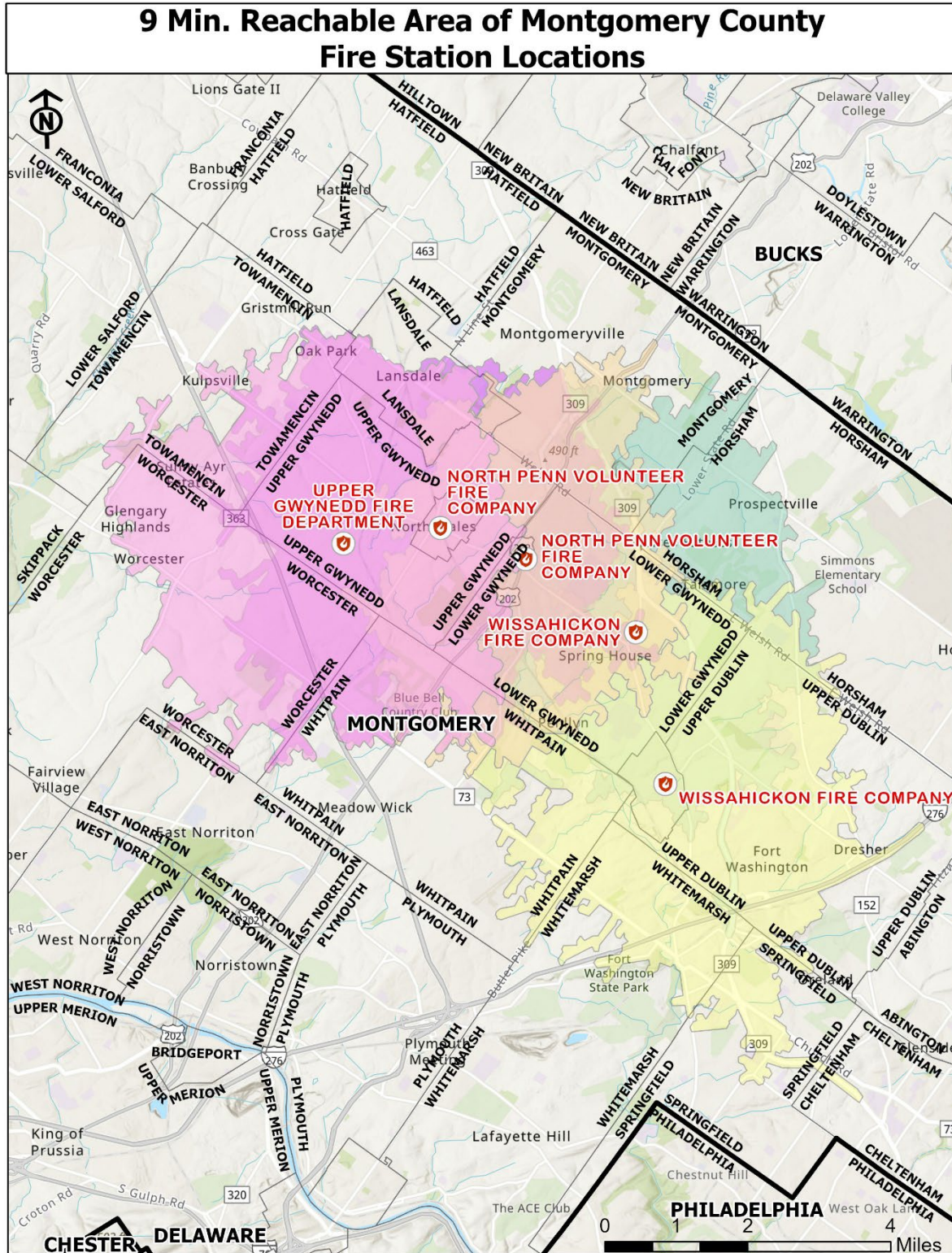
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- Ambler Borough has the highest population density, indicating an urban setting with concentrated residential and commercial zones.
- North Wales Borough also demonstrates a dense, walkable community footprint.
- Lower Gwynedd Township maintains a suburban character, with lower population density and a larger geographic footprint.

Implications for Fire Service Regionalization

- High-density boroughs (Ambler and North Wales) may benefit from centralized staffing and rapid response coverage.
- Larger, lower-density townships (Upper and Lower Gwynedd) could focus on distributed apparatus and station coverage.
- Regionalization can balance urban and suburban service demand, ensuring efficient allocation of personnel, apparatus, and funding.
- A coordinated approach supports equitable service delivery and shared investment in prevention, training, and readiness.

Fire Station Locations



Map Legend: Colored areas show estimated 9-minute fire apparatus travel coverage from Upper Gwynedd FD (pink/purple), North Penn VFC (tan/gray), and Wissahickon FC (yellow/green); helmet icons mark station locations; bold lines indicate county boundaries and thin lines indicate municipal boundaries.

Current Situation

In this section, a profile for each of the three volunteer fire companies (North Penn, Wissahickon, and Upper Gwynedd Township) will be given across key dimensions: service area and community served, organizational structure and staffing, facilities and apparatus, incident volume and performance, finances, training, and mutual aid agreements. Understanding the current state is crucial to identifying where consolidation might offer improvements or face obstacles.

North Penn Volunteer Fire Company (Station 62)



Organizational Structure & Staffing: North Penn VFC is a 100% volunteer organization with no paid firefighters. It is structured as a nonprofit fire company with a leadership hierarchy typical of volunteer departments. The operational ranks include a Fire Chief (volunteer) who leads the department, at least one Deputy Chief and one or more Assistant Chiefs, Captains, Lieutenants, and a base of firefighters. Separately, there is an administrative side (often a President, Board of Directors, or Trustees) that manages the company's business affairs and the social club. As of 2023, NPVFC has approximately fifty-five (55) active firefighting members (interior and exterior firefighters) and about 15 - 20 additional non-firefighting members (fire police, administrative, or auxiliary roles), according to company roster data. This size places it in the mid-range for volunteer companies. However, active turnout on calls is often lower on a typical fire call. A handful of volunteers (approximately 5 -10) might respond initially, with more coming later or on standby from other companies. The company has historically had strong

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family involvement and multi-generational members. Retention and recruitment are ongoing struggles like many departments. North Penn has lost members due to increasing training demands and life commitments. They have a junior firefighter program for teenagers to build the pipeline. Importantly, North Penn runs a Quick Response Service (QRS) for medical calls, meaning some members are certified Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) or first responders and carry medical gear. The QRS program has attracted a few members interested in medical service.

In terms of duty coverage, NPVFC does not always staff the station around the clock. Volunteers respond from home or work when paged. The firehouse may have members present during some evenings for the social club or training nights (every Monday there is training/drill night at 7pm, often attended by many members). One best practice identified during the station visit was that occasionally members telework from the station, which helps with reducing response times. North Wales Borough recently joined a county initiative to offer tax rebates for active volunteers to incentivize participation. There are no career firefighters, so issues like pay scales do not apply, though volunteers do receive token benefits (e.g., small yearly stipends or incentive points, funded through the state relief association, for equipment or training costs).

Stations & Apparatus: NPVFC operates out of two stations. The main station is located at 141 S. Main Street, North Wales; a recently renovated historic firehouse that has been expanded over time. The facility includes three apparatus bays, a meeting room, offices, and the North Penn Fire Co. Social Club (a members-only bar and hall). Renovations included renovated living quarters for nighttime staffing on the ground floor, offices for daytime staffing on the second floor and a state-of-the-art training facility capable of hosting multi-company trainings on the third floor. The Lower Gwynedd station is located on the Foulkeways Retirement Community property with direct access to the 202 bypass. Members who respond to this station reside in Lower and Upper Gwynedd Engine 62 is housed at this location. Being an older facility on a tight urban lot, space is limited for larger modern apparatus. Currently, NPVFC's fleet consists of engines (Engine 62-1 and 62-2, one of which is located at the substation and is outfitted to initiate vehicle stabilization and extrication due to its proximity to route 202), one rescue squad (a fully outfitted truck capable of fire operations as well as vehicle extrication), one ladder truck, a Quick Response Service vehicle, a traffic unit and two command vehicles. North Penn's newer ladder truck is relied upon by municipalities not only locally but throughout the region. Similar to WFCs rescue, NPVFC is recognized as one of the county's most fully outfitted, trained and effective ladder companies, leading to the ladder truck being called to a broad area of coverage. Their engines are well-equipped with hose, foam, and vehicle extrication tools. North Penn's apparatus is of varying ages: one engine is relatively modern (2016) and the other older (early 2000s). The apparatus is properly maintained but faces upcoming capital needs for replacement. The relief association has purchased equipment like thermal imaging cameras, hydraulic rescue tools, and modern Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for firefighters. The current apparatus and equipment are suitable for the typical incidents in North Wales and the surrounding region.

Call Volume & Incident Types: North Penn's call volume has significantly increased in recent years, primarily due to the addition of QRS medical calls. Historically, the company responded to ~300 - 350 fire/rescue calls per year (e.g., 332 in 2018). In 2023, North Penn recorded approximately 653 calls (294 fire-related and 359 medical) according to internal reports. This breaks down to daily call activity of 1.8 calls/day on average, which is a heavy load for a volunteer fire company. For fire calls, the majority are alarm system activations, smoke/co alarms, minor fires (cooking, trash, vehicle fires), and some structure fire responses (many of which turn out to be minor or mutual aid assists). Working fires in

North Wales are infrequent (a handful per year), but the company responds frequently to working fires in nearby towns as part of mutual aid. Vehicle accidents with entrapment (requiring rescue tools) occur periodically on local roads. NPVFC manages these using their rescue-engine equipment or calls for Wissahickon's heavy rescue if needed. Evenings and weekends see strong turnout times. The performance metric that North Penn prides itself on is that they answer every call dispatched. There have been very few instances where they failed to respond entirely (thanks to mutual aid if their own crew was short). Nonetheless, coverage gaps exist. For example, if a second call comes in while the first is ongoing, or if a big incident requires more personnel than North Penn has on hand. These gaps are a driving factor behind considering consolidation.

Budget, Funding & Financial Health: NPVFC has a dual-stream funding model common to PA volunteer companies. They receive municipal contributions from North Wales Borough and Lower Gwynedd Township (each gives an annual donation or contract payment for fire services). These are modest, totaling tens of thousands of dollars per year. The company's largest steady funding comes from fundraising and hall rentals. The Social Club and Banquet Hall operations provide significant revenue that goes toward operations. For example, an analysis of North Penn's finances indicates revenue from hall rentals, fund drive donations, and events helps cover general operating expenses (maintenance, utilities, training, fuel). North Penn also receives state relief association funds (~\$50 - 60k/year, varying) which must be used for specific purposes (e.g., safety equipment, insurance, training, retirement programs for volunteers). Looking at a recent budget (2023), North Penn's total operating expenditures were \$500,000 (including both general and relief-funded expenses). That year, they ran a deficit in the general fund of about \$201k, covered by reserves or additional fundraising. Major cost drivers include apparatus maintenance, equipment upgrades, insurance, and facilities upkeep. The borough's small tax base limits how much public funding can increase, so NPVFC is somewhat financially strained and relies on volunteer fundraising efforts. They have been successful in securing occasional grants (e.g., FEMA Assistance to Firefighters Grants for gear or SCBAs, and state grants for small projects), but long-term capital like replacing a fire engine (cost ~\$700k+) is a looming challenge. If consolidation occurs, a more robust, shared funding model could help alleviate some of North Penn's financial pressures.

Training, Certifications & Standards: North Penn's firefighters maintain training certifications at or above minimum standards. As noted, new members are sent for Firefighter I certification (a 188-hour NFPA 1001 compliant course) at the Montgomery County Fire Academy. Many senior members have Firefighter II and some officer training (Fire Officer I). Several members are certified EMTs or Emergency Medical Responder (EMRs), supporting the QRS program. The company conducts weekly training drills (Monday nights) where they practice skills ranging from engine company operations, laddering, vehicle rescue, to joint drills with nearby companies. They also make use of the county's training facilities for live burns and specialized training. NPVFC meets national standards in areas like respiratory protection (SCBA fit testing) and is part of the county accountability system at incidents. One area of improvement identified is joint training. Currently North Penn, Wissahickon, and Upper Gwynedd conduct some drills together but not routinely. Each has its own procedures which occasionally differ. Under consolidation, unified standard operating guidelines (SOGs) and joint training would be implemented so that crews from any station function interchangeably. North Penn is open to this. In fact, they recognize that standardizing training and protocols across a broader pool could improve safety and effectiveness.

Inter-Local Agreements & Mutual Aid: North Penn VFC has automatic mutual aid arrangements with both Wissahickon and West Point (Upper Gwynedd). Practically, this means for certain call types or times of day, the dispatch center will simultaneously alert one or both of the other fire companies to respond. For example, any report of a structure fire in North Wales will dispatch NPVFC along with WFC’s ladder and an engine from Upper Gwynedd. Additionally, NPVFC is part of the Eastern Montgomery County firefighting network and the North Penn area companies’ alliance, taking part in larger scale task forces and also contributes two qualified engines to the regions LDH task force.

. The company’s relief association is separate but in coordination with Wissahickon’s and Upper Gwynedd’s relief associations. There is no formal sharing of those funds currently (by law each municipality’s allocation goes to the fire company serving it). In summary, North Penn has a cooperative but independent relationship with its neighbors. They help each other out on calls, but each maintains its own administration, fundraising, and identity. These existing collaborations are a foundation on which a regional department could build upon and integrating it with the others will require careful handling of its dual-station operations and community identity.

SWOT Analysis: North Wales Borough Fire Service

<p><u>Strengths (Internal)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated Volunteer Base: Long-standing tradition of community service. • Compact Service Area: Small size allows for fast travel distances within the borough. • Strong Community Ties: Local support for the fire company and fundraising. • Mutual Aid Relationships: Close in proximity to Upper Gwynedd and Wissahickon fire companies. 	<p><u>Opportunities (External)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regionalization: Potential to integrate with surrounding departments for improved coverage. • Grant Funding: Eligibility for SAFER/AFG grants to improve staffing and equipment. • Community Outreach: Engaging younger residents through cadet and explorer programs. • Shared Training Resources: Leverage regional training facilities and programs.
<p><u>Weaknesses (Internal)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aging Infrastructure: Older station and equipment limit capacity and operational flexibility. • Volunteer Shortages: Limited availability during weekday hours; recruitment challenges. • Space Constraints: Borough layout restricts apparatus maneuverability and future expansion. 	<p><u>Threats (External)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decline in Volunteerism: Borough trend mirrors national and state declines. • Operational Strain: Increased call volume and complexity without matching growth in capacity. • Public Safety Expectations: Growing expectations for professional-level response capabilities.

• Inconsistent Turnout: Risk of under-staffed calls during peak demand periods.

• Infrastructure Vulnerability: Narrow streets and old buildings increase fire spread risk.

Wissahickon Fire Company (Station 7)



Organizational Structure & Staffing: Wissahickon Fire Company is one of the larger volunteer fire organizations in Montgomery County. It is an entirely volunteer force with 65+ active firefighters on the roster (men and women) ranging from junior firefighters to senior officers. The company's internal structure includes a Fire Chief (volunteer) who leads operations, typically assisted by a Deputy Chief for Ambler, a Deputy Chief for Lower Gwynedd (each station has an officer in charge), several Captains and Lieutenants overseeing apparatus crews and special units, and a complement of line firefighters and fire police. WFC also has a Relief Association and an administrative arm (headed by a President and executive board) to manage non-operational matters. There are specialized teams within the company. For instance, given WFC's heavy rescue capability, they have a Rescue Services team focusing on technical rescue disciplines (vehicle rescue, high-angle rope, water rescue). The staffing model is a volunteer "pager response." However, WFC has taken steps to boost in-station staffing. As a result, WFC's turnout is quite robust. On many incidents, especially evenings, 15-20 members may respond, which is significantly higher than smaller companies. Daytime response is leaner but still they manage a crew thanks to a number of retirees or members who work nearby. Cultural integration within WFC has historically been strong. WFC values its internal cohesion highly and would expect any consolidation to preserve the volunteer ethos and social camaraderie they have built.

Stations & Apparatus: WFC's two stations house an impressive fleet of fire apparatus, reflecting the wide mission profile of the company. At Ambler Station (Station 7A), a modern firehouse on Race Street, they house Ladder 7, Engine 7, and Rescue 7 as front-line apparatus, along with a utility truck and a fire police/traffic unit. Ladder 7 is a 100-foot aerial ladder truck (Pierce), which is the only full-size aerial in the immediate area, making it a critical asset for multi-story fires and roof operations. Rescue 7 is a heavy rescue (a large squad truck carrying extensive rescue equipment such as extrication tools, high-angle rescue gear, trench rescue shores, boat). Engine 7 is a modern engine/pumper with a 1500 GPM pump and large water tank. These units are primarily staffed by Ambler volunteers and typically are first-out for incidents in Ambler Borough. At the Lower Gwynedd Station (Station 7B) on Bethlehem Pike, the company stations Squad 7 (a rescue-pumper), which can operate as both an engine and light rescue, and additional support vehicles (another traffic unit and a backup utility). Squad 7 is a 2012 E-One pumper-rescue that carries jaws of life and firefighting equipment, ideal for the mix of auto accidents and fire calls in Lower Gwynedd. WFC has one Chief's vehicle and two Traffic Units (7A and 7B). In total, Wissahickon operates about 8 - 10 apparatus units, valued over \$3 million. The apparatus is in good condition, and many are new (Engine 7 is 2019, Rescue 7 is 2015, Ladder 7 is 2007 and a new Ladder is expected in 2026). The company and relief association have kept equipment up to date. All frontline vehicles have modern pumps, hoses, ladders, SCBA, and even specialized gear like a rescue boat if needed. These resources make WFC somewhat of a regional leader in technical rescue capability. Facility-wise, both stations are well-maintained. The Ambler station is a hub of activity (also used for community events, hosting the fire company's annual fund drive night), whereas the Lower Gwynedd station is smaller and more utilitarian, used primarily to cut response times in the township. In a consolidation scenario, both stations would be retained given their necessity for coverage. However, decisions need to be made on how to optimally deploy apparatus among all regional stations to reduce duplication.

Call Volume & Operational Performance: Wissahickon Fire Company responds to the highest volume of incidents among the three departments, largely due to the concentration of alarm systems and population in its area. As noted earlier, WFC responded to 612 calls in 2018, and in recent years the annual total has hovered in the 486 - 597 range (516 calls in 2021, 486 call in 2022, and 597 calls in 2023). This equates to approximately 2-4 working fires in their first due response area per year. The breakdown of incident types is heavily skewed toward fire alarms (automatic fire alarms, smoke detector activations), which accounted for about 52% of calls in one analysis. This is not unusual given the number of commercial and institutional buildings. Each has monitored alarm systems that trigger responses (and many turn out to be false alarms or burnt food). Another substantial chunk (~11%) is gas leaks (natural gas odors) and electrical hazards (wires down). Actual structure fires and vehicle fires comprise a smaller percentage, but WFC still averages a fair number of working fires each year. Importantly, WFC is often first on scene for fires in its area and frequently responds as mutual aid as the FAST (Firefighter Assist & Search Team) or with the ladder or rescue to support neighboring departments. They measure success not just by their own calls but by effective aid given. For instance, WFC's ladder truck and staffing have been credited with saving property in mutual aid fires throughout the North Penn area.

In terms of response times, WFC benefits from the close proximity of many volunteers to the Ambler station. It is not uncommon for the first engine or ladder to go enroute within 4 minutes of dispatch at night. On average, Ambler area responses see a first unit on scene in 6 - 8 minutes, which is reasonable for a volunteer service. The Lower Gwynedd station 7B significantly improves response in the township. Without it, Ambler units would take longer to reach the township's far end. With 7B, units

can arrive in the township at similar times (the 8 - 9-minute range in worst case for the far south). WFC's on-scene performance is strong. Thanks to having a suitable number of personnel, they can quickly implement incident command, fire attack, ventilation, and rescue simultaneously upon arrival. This is a level of operational effectiveness that some smaller companies struggle to achieve without waiting for backup. This efficiency contributes to the favorable insurance ratings in the area. However, WFC is not immune to volunteer staffing challenges. Daytime turnout might only yield one fully staffed truck initially, and if simultaneous calls occur, they must lean on mutual aid (e.g. if an alarm comes in while they are at a fire scene, an out-of-town company covers the second call). Such scenarios do happen given the call volume. WFC's leadership has been proactive in running annual fund drives to remind residents of their value, often highlighting quick response stats and saves made, to maintain public support.

Financials, Budget & Funding Sources: Wissahickon Fire Company's finances are robust but stretched by the demands of operating two stations and a large apparatus fleet. The company is primarily funded through municipal contributions from Ambler Borough and Lower Gwynedd Township, plus an aggressive fundraising program. Lower Gwynedd, being larger, contributes a significant amount annually to WFC (for example, in 2023 Lower Gwynedd budgeted tens of thousands for fire services, split between WFC and NPVFC). Ambler Borough, with a smaller budget, contributes a smaller amount but relative to their size. Combined, municipal funding covers a fraction of operating costs (perhaps 20-30%). Fundraising and donations cover much of the rest. WFC runs a yearly mailed Fund Drive campaign in both communities which raises a substantial sum (nearly \$70k in 2023, with minimal expense, yielding ~\$61.5k net). Corporate donations, including notably from businesses like those in local industrial parks, added another ~\$17k in 2023. All told, WFC's fundraising income in 2023 netted around \$128,000. In addition, WFC receives PA state relief funds (via Ambler and L. Gwynedd allocations) which total around \$120k per year (down substantially from 2020). These go toward insurance, gear, and other eligible expenses. The company has also been successful at winning grants. For example, they have obtained state and federal grants for apparatus purchases or station improvements in the past. The financial health of WFC is sound in that they can pay their bills and have been making capital improvements (they bought a new Engine 7 in 2018 and a new Chief's vehicle in 2019 with capital funds). However, the cost of replacing their 100' ladder (a multi-million-dollar expense) looms in the next 5-7 years and maintaining two stations (utilities and maintenance) is a constant cost. They do carry reserve funds earmarked for apparatus replacement, but not enough yet to cover a ladder outright. Under a consolidated department, WFC would expect the larger entity to assume responsibility for capital replacements in a planned manner (likely funded by a combination of municipal contributions and grants, rather than relying on door-to-door fundraising as heavily). Another aspect is equity in funding. Lower Gwynedd's leaders have noted that their township currently contributes to two fire companies (WFC and NPVFC) and want to ensure they are paying a fair share relative to Upper Gwynedd or Ambler. Consequently, finances will be a significant discussion point in consolidation. WFC's well-established fundraising apparatus and donor base is an asset that a regional department could leverage (for instance they could lead a unified fund drive across all four communities). However, the Fund Drive was down substantially (40K) in 2024.

Training & Certification: Wissahickon's training program is extensive. They conduct regular weekly drills (often on Monday nights concurrently with NPVFC, though at their respective stations) and frequent weekend special training for technical rescue. As mentioned, all active firefighters are encouraged to attain Firefighter I certification. WFC has one of the higher percentages of FFII-certified volunteers as well. They also host multi-company drills. For example, they host an annual large-scale

drill at a commercial property or at the Montgomery County Fire Academy’s training ground with neighbors. Given WFC’s specialties, members pursue certifications like Vehicle Rescue Technician, Swift Water Rescue, and Hazardous Materials Operations. The company keeps detailed training records to comply with ISO and NFPA benchmarks (they know that maintaining training hours is key to good ISO scores). Also, WFC has some state-certified fire instructors among its ranks, which allows them to run in-house training classes for their members and mutual aid partners. They adhere to standard operating guidelines (SOGs) that cover firefighting tactics, rescue operations, and safety. Their SOGs were internally developed but aligned with county protocols. If consolidation moves forward, WFC’s training culture would be of huge benefit to the regional department. They could share instructors and expand joint training so that all firefighters across the new organization train to the highest common standard.

Mutual Aid & Intersections with Other Departments: WFC has mutual aid agreements on all sides. They are part of the Eastern Montgomery County Large Diameter Hose (LDH) Task Force for water supply in areas without hydrants (though not much of that is in their first due area). They are routinely dispatched along with NPVFC for calls in Lower Gwynedd (the township assures both companies are alerted depending on location). They have a close operational relationship with the Fort Washington Fire Company (in Upper Dublin) just to the south. For instance, on structure fires in Ambler or Lower Gwynedd, Fort Washington often sends an engine or tower ladder automatically, and vice versa. Similarly, Centre Square Fire Company (Whitpain Twp) and Flourtown Fire Company (Springfield Twp) are part of the mutual aid web. WFC is viewed as a “bridge” company linking the North Penn area departments with those in Eastern Montgomery County. Therefore, they sometimes respond quite far for major incidents (e.g., massive fires or rescue calls in neighboring counties). Their mutual aid philosophy is incredibly open. They will send help whenever requested and often call for help early if needed. This culture of cooperation is helpful when contemplating a regional department. WFC’s leaders are already skilled at coordinating multi-company responses. However, it also means any internal consolidation must maintain good external mutual aid relationships. The new department would still rely on neighbors like Fort Washington or Lansdale for big incidents (just as they rely on WFC’s special apparatus). There are no significant legal barriers in WFC’s mutual aid agreements that would hinder consolidation. Those agreements would simply be transferred to or renegotiated by the new regional entity.

In summary, Wissahickon Fire Company is a high-performing volunteer department with strong membership and capabilities, but it shares the fundamental challenges of volunteerism (recruitment, retention, and funding capital needs). It also carries a large operational burden for two municipalities. The current state shows a company holding its own, even thriving in some respects, yet recognizing that the status quo may not be indefinitely sustainable (e.g., as volunteer ranks potentially decline). WFC is the “anchor” of any regional fire service given its size and assets but integrating it with the others will require careful handling of its dual-station operations and community identity.

SWOT Analysis: Lower Gwynedd Township Fire Service

<p><u>Strengths (Internal)</u> • Community-Oriented Volunteer Service: Strong local identity and resident support.</p>	<p><u>Opportunities (External)</u> • Regionalization Partnerships: Enhance capacity, funding, and operational consistency through shared services.</p>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographic Advantage: Centrally located fire station provides access to key residential zones. • Interagency Cooperation: Effective mutual aid with Wissahickon and surrounding departments. • Stable Leadership: Consistent fire company governance fosters continuity and experience. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeted Grant Applications: SAFER and AFG grants can support recruitment, retention, and modernization. • Senior Outreach and Prevention Programs: Serve large older adult population with risk reduction strategies. • Community Education Expansion: Build on positive reputation to grow fire prevention and preparedness efforts.
<p><u>Weaknesses (Internal)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer Turnout Variability: Inconsistent response during weekday hours. • Aging Equipment and Facility Needs: Apparatus and infrastructure approaching replacement timelines. • Lack of Paid Staffing: Limits surge capacity for high-demand events or multiple simultaneous incidents. • Limited Training Resources: Relies heavily on external partners for firefighter education. 	<p><u>Threats (External)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Declining Volunteer Pool: Reflects state and national trends in volunteer firefighting. • Increased Fire Call Volume: Aging population and suburban development increase service demands. • Capital Funding Constraints: Limited budget flexibility for large-scale apparatus or facility upgrades. • Service Gaps Without Mutual Aid: Reliance on external agencies increases vulnerability if mutual aid is unavailable.

SWOT Analysis: Ambler Borough Fire Service

<p><u>Strengths (Internal)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historic and Trusted Fire Company (Wissahickon Fire Co.): Strong community identity and recognition. • Strategic Location: Central fire station provides good access to borough and parts of Lower Gwynedd. • Experienced Core Volunteers: Retained a reliable core of veteran volunteers. 	<p><u>Opportunities (External)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional Collaboration: Potential for improved staffing, training, and resource sharing. • Grant Funding: Access to AFG, SAFER grants for recruitment, equipment, and facilities. • Modernization through Regional Planning: Co-location opportunities and tech upgrades.
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active Fire Prevention and Community Programs: Engages schools and residents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing Community Engagement: Potential volunteer recruitment from local institutions.
<p><u>Weaknesses (Internal)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aging Infrastructure: Fire station and apparatus are older and need modernization. • Volunteer Staffing Challenges: Inconsistent daytime response; aging membership. • Limited Fiscal Capacity: Small tax base; reliant on fundraising and municipal support. • Equipment Redundancy: Apparatus overlaps with neighboring departments. 	<p><u>Threats (External)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Declining Volunteerism: Statewide trend affecting availability and response reliability. • Increasing Call Volume and Complexity: EMS assists, severe weather, and alarms. • Resistance to Change: Potential opposition to regionalization or shared services. • Infrastructure Vulnerability: Narrow streets, dense construction, and limited access.

Upper Gwynedd Township Fire Department (Station 80)



Organizational Structure & Staffing: UGTFD is a volunteer organization, but it has a slightly different governance because of the close relationship with the township. The Fire Chief of UGTFD is also recognized as the Township Fire Chief, which means this role straddles volunteer leadership and municipal management. The township employs a full-time Fire Marshal and a Deputy Fire Marshal for code enforcement and administrative duties. This provides a consistent presence for fire safety in local government. The volunteer chain of command includes a Deputy Chief, an Assistant Chief, a couple of Captains, and several Lieutenants (as indicated by their roster, e.g., Deputy Chief, Assistant Chief, and Captain roles were filled by volunteer members). Total active membership is around 50 - 60 volunteer firefighters; similar to North Penn in size. The roster includes specialized roles like QRS officers (for medical first response) and engineers (drivers). Notably, many UGTFD volunteers hold advanced officer training (the roster showed qualifications like Fire Officer I/II “FO III, FO IV” next to names), reflecting a strong emphasis on leadership development. Volunteer turnout is solid for a one-station department. Typically, UGTFD can dispatch an engine or squad with 4 - 6 personnel quickly and have others follow. Members sign up to be on call for EMS runs to ensure someone responds to medical assists. As with others, daytime staffing is a concern. UGTFD addresses the concern by recruiting volunteers who work second shift or nights. Upper Gwynedd has considered hiring part-time and/or full-time firefighters for daytime responses to ensure coverage, but so far, the volunteer response has been sufficient when augmented by mutual aid. Organizational culture is one of professionalism and

integration with local government. UGTFD volunteers wear township fire department uniforms and have strong municipal support. This could serve as a model for a regional department's structure (e.g., a blend of municipal oversight with volunteer staffing).

Stations & Apparatus: UGTFD operates a single station at 660 Garfield Ave in West Point, which was renovated/expanded in 1996. It is a spacious facility with multiple bays (to house up to five vehicles), a training room, offices, and a small museum area of the company's history. The apparatus inventory is up-to-date and geared towards multi-role functionality, as is common for a one-station department. Key apparatus includes Quint 80, a 2021 Rosenbauer 78-foot Quint (combination pumper-ladder) which carries a 2000 GPM pump, water tank, hoses, and an aerial device. The Quint gives UGTFD limited aerial capability (not as tall as a tower ladder but it suffices for most 2-3 story buildings and is extremely useful for roof work and elevated master streams). Squad 80 possesses a 2021 Rosenbauer engine-rescue (2000 GPM pump, 750-gallons of water, plus full rescue tool complement), which is the primary attack engine on fires but also acts as a rescue truck for vehicle extrications. Engine 80, a 2008 Seagrave, serves as a secondary engine and water supply apparatus (with a larger 2250 GPM pump). For medical and support responses, they have a QRS 80; a Chevy pickup outfitted with medical gear used for EMS assist calls. Additionally, Utility 80 (a crew cab truck) carries extra equipment and/or staffing to fire scenes. Rounding out the fleet, are several command/utility vehicles including Chief 80's vehicle (2024 Ford Expedition) and vehicles for the Deputy, Assistant, and an Officer-in-Charge (OIC 80). These are responder SUVs/pickups allowing officers to go directly to scenes and begin size-up. The presence of multiple command vehicles is notable and speaks to their approach. Often, the Chief or other officers will respond directly to an incident to establish command while the engine crew comes from the station. All apparatus is owned by either the township or the fire company/relief association as noted in records.

Call Volume & Performance: Upper Gwynedd's call volume has shown an upward trend, reflecting both population growth and expanded services. According to official statistics, UGTFD responded to 655 calls in 2024 (471 fire-related, 184 QRS medical) and 568 calls in 2023 (436 fire, 132 QRS). This indicates an average of ~1.5 to 1.8 calls per day. The proportion of medical calls (~20-30%) shows the impact of their QRS program, but unlike North Penn, fire and rescue calls still represent most of their runs. Typical incidents include fire alarms and vehicle accidents (some with entrapment on busy roads).

Merck has an internal fire brigade and alarm monitoring. Small issues are often managed by Merck's crew, but UGTFD still responds as backup. When anything significant occurs at Merck (chemical leak, fire in a lab), UGTFD would establish a unified command with Merck's emergency response team. This requires specialized training and pre-planning, which UGTFD has invested in. It also influences apparatus needs (e.g., large foam capacity or hazmat gear). A regional department would have to maintain this partnership with Merck and incorporate specialized industrial firefighting training for more members.

UGTFD's response times are good given one station covering a moderate area. For the core of the township near West Point, turnout is often under 5 minutes. To the township border, travel time averages around 7-8 minutes. The 2021 acquisition of the Quint allowed them to station an aerial device right in Upper Gwynedd; improving response for tasks that previously might wait for a ladder coming from Lansdale. Now, the Quint goes on first alarms to any structure fire and usually arrives early. For example, a fire in a townhouse might see Squad 80 and Quint 80 arrive as first due units, with North Penn's engine or Lansdale's truck arriving shortly after, if dispatched. UGTFD practices an

aggressive interior attack strategy when appropriate and has a good history of containing fires to the room or area of origin. Their incident command is often run by a Chief or Deputy Chief on scene using modern ICS principles. They measure performance via metrics like response time and the percentage of calls with full crew turnout and report these to the township commissioners periodically.

Financial & Funding: Upper Gwynedd has a dedicated fire tax all allocated for fire services. This covers things like apparatus purchases (as noted, the township bought the \$1+ million Quint and the new Squad), contributions toward operating costs, and the salary of the Fire Marshal. Additionally, the volunteer fire company itself raises some funds. They also rent out a banquet hall at their station for community use (which brought in ~\$46k revenue in 2022 and \$48.9k in 2023).

With township funding covering most big-ticket items, UGTFD uses its raised funds for day-to-day operations, volunteer incentives, and any extras. Their financial health is quite strong on paper. They usually run a balanced or surplus budget, and their financial reporting for 2023 showed a positive net in relief funds and manageable operations. The presence of local government backing means UGTFD can plan apparatus replacement, which is a big advantage in terms of sustainability. In consolidation talks, though, this raises a critical concern: Upper Gwynedd currently shoulders a lot of cost for fire services (as an individual township), whereas Ambler and Lower Gwynedd pay less in relative terms (relying more on volunteer fundraising). A regional funding model must equitably redistribute costs; meaning Lower Gwynedd and Ambler would pay more than they currently do, while Upper Gwynedd might pay slightly less, to share the burden fairly. The new department could consider a uniform fire tax across all municipalities to fund operations (with revenue then pooled). This is a policy matter the stakeholders would negotiate.

Training & Personnel Development: UGTFD maintains a rigorous training regime, similarly, aligned with NFPA standards. Their volunteers frequently train on Monday nights as well, often at the same county academy sessions as WFC and NPVFC. The leadership encourages obtaining Firefighter I and additional certifications. The roster list indicated members with advanced fire officer training, which is testament to their encouragement of professional development. UGTFD also does HazMat awareness and operations training due to Merck. They coordinate with Merck's fire brigade for drills on site occasionally, which is a very specialized form of training (industrial firefighting, high-voltage electrical emergencies). Medical training is another aspect. As a QRS provider, they ensure at least a core group of members are certified Emergency Medical Responders or EMTs. This cross-training has proven lifesaving on medical calls where they arrive before an ambulance. The benefit of consolidation here would be cross-pollination. UGTFD could impart industrial firefighting knowledge and formalized incident command practice to the whole regional team, while learning from WFC's technical rescue expertise and NPVFC's intimate local knowledge of North Wales. All three companies already adhere to the county's incident command and accountability system, so that part is compatible. The main difference might be in SOPs. Each company has slightly different operating procedures (for example, radio call signs or how they assign tasks upon arrival). One objective in moving toward a combined department would be to create one standard operating procedure manual so that whether a volunteer is from Ambler or North Wales or West Point, they operate in the same way on the fireground.

Mutual Aid Agreements: Upper Gwynedd has mutual aid that is automatically built into dispatch protocols. As earlier mentioned, North Penn (Station 62) is on first alarm for any reported structure fire in Upper Gwynedd. Typically, NPVFC is dispatched with their Ladder for mutual aid life safety priority one calls. With the Quint, dispatch protocols may be adjusting but for larger fires, they still request

additional aerial apparatus. There is also automatic aid to North Wales. The inter-company relationships are exceptionally good at the operational level. At the leadership level, the three chiefs (WFC, NPVFC, UGTFD) meet occasionally for coordination (especially given Lower Gwynedd’s coverage split and the shared borders). They collectively understand each other’s capabilities. This mutual aid network effectively already regionalizes emergency response to a degree, which is why moving to formal consolidation could yield efficiency gains under one department. Legally, UGTFD is part of the township structure, so any mutual aid agreements are codified via township resolution or just county run cards. A consolidation would mean rewriting those mutual aid plans for the new department (e.g., one regional department could be represented by multiple stations on the run cards). This is a manageable administrative task.

In conclusion, UGTFD represents a high-functioning volunteer fire company with substantial municipal integration and support. Its current state is strong with new apparatus, healthy membership, and good community backing. The impetus for it to consolidate may be less urgent internally (they are not struggling severely in isolation), but they stand to benefit from regionalization in terms of greater staffing pool and elimination of duplication on multi-company responses. Upper Gwynedd’s officials see consolidation as an opportunity to enhance service delivery across the region, while potentially lowering per-capita costs by sharing resources. The UGTFD culture of working closely with local government may serve as the blueprint for governance in a regional model (e.g., a regional fire commission). The challenge will be blending that with the more independent volunteer cultures of WFC and NPVFC.

SWOT Analysis Upper Gwynedd Township Fire Services

<p><u>Strengths (Internal)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer Department: Part-time staffing enhances reliability and coverage. • Modern Apparatus: More up-to-date fleet compared to nearby municipalities. 	<p><u>Opportunities (External)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional Leadership Role: Positioned to lead regionalization due to size and resources. • Access to Industrial Resources: Partnerships with local businesses (e.g., Merck) for training and support.
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic Location: Access to commercial, residential, and industrial zones. • Interdepartmental Coordination: Strong mutual aid relationships with North Wales and surrounding townships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology Integration: Upgrade to regional dispatch, CAD, and response systems. • Capital Project Funding: Eligible for federal/state grants to support station and fleet modernization.
<p><u>Weaknesses (Internal)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer Dependency: Still reliant on volunteers for full response capability. • Limited Training Infrastructure: No dedicated training facility within the township. • Staffing Gaps: Weekday and off-hour response may be limited without full-time crews. • Growing Demand: Population and development growth outpacing staffing expansion. 	<p><u>Threats (External)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer Decline: Risk of decreased participation over time, consistent with state trends. • Complex Incident Types: Industrial and hazmat risks require advanced training and equipment. • Funding Competition: Shared tax base and rising costs challenge capital investment. • Community Growth: Increases demand for service without guaranteed increase in resources.

Gap Analysis

The purpose of this gap analysis is to identify disparities between the current state of fire service delivery within the four participating municipalities and the optimal state as defined by National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards, ISO Public Protection Classification criteria, and regional best practices. This analysis highlights areas requiring investment, coordination, or transformation to achieve high-performing, sustainable fire service operations.

1. Response Time Compliance (NFPA 1720 Standard)

Jurisdiction	NFPA Standard (Goal)	Observed Performance	Gap
All Municipalities	≤ 9 minutes for 90% of calls (urban/suburban)	Performance varies between 50–85%	None meet the 90% threshold consistently

Analysis:

- Response times are inconsistent, especially during volunteer off-peak hours.
- Lack of automatic dispatch protocols delays turnout in some areas.
- No consolidated regional response coverage to offset local staffing limitations.

2. Staffing and Volunteer Capacity

Benchmark	Current State	Gap
NFPA 1720: 15 firefighters within 9 minutes	Varies: 4–10 personnel typical initial response	Inconsistent ability to meet staffing benchmarks
Volunteer Sustainability	Volunteer attrition is high; recruitment is sporadic	Lack of unified recruitment and retention strategy

Analysis:

- Departments operate independently, limiting cross-jurisdictional surge capacity.
- Aging volunteer base with minimal succession planning.
- Inadequate daytime coverage in some municipalities due to work-hour constraints.

3. Apparatus and Equipment Standardization

NFPA 1901/1906 (Apparatus Standards)	Current Inventory Condition	Gap
Standardized, NFPA-compliant fleet	Aging apparatus; mixed compliance	Delayed replacements; lack of coordinated planning
Shared Equipment Use	Limited mutual inventory tracking or joint procurement	Missed savings and operational flexibility

Analysis:

- Capital planning is done in a silo. Duplication exists in certain apparatus categories.
- No interoperability standardization between radio systems and SCBA units.

4. Facility Coverage and Distribution

Facility Requirement	Current Layout	Gap
4–6-minute drive-time coverage area	Several overlap zones; other areas under-served	Uneven station placement and coverage
Facility Condition Assessment	Mixed; some stations outdated or undersized	Deferred maintenance and ADA/accessibility gaps

Analysis:

- No shared GIS-based deployment modeling to optimize locations.
- Missed opportunities for consolidation or co-location of services.

5. Training and Certification

Standard	Current Practice	Gap
NFPA 1001/1021/1041/1521 certifications	Varies by department; no unified requirements	Lack of standardized training framework across agencies
Joint Drills and ICS Integration	Occasional inter-agency drills	Infrequent and informal inter-departmental coordination

Analysis:

- No regional training officer or joint curriculum.
- Missed opportunity for economies of scale in continuing education and compliance.

6. Governance, Oversight, and Funding

Best Practice	Current Structure	Gap
Unified governance or service agreement	Independent municipal oversight	No shared accountability, strategic plan, or cost-sharing model
Long-Term Capital Planning	Each municipality plans independently	Fragmented funding and inconsistent priorities

Analysis:

- Absence of a formalized shared services model.
- Budget allocations are not consistently tied to performance measures.

Summary of Identified Gaps

Category	Primary Gaps Identified
Response Times	Inconsistent 9-minute compliance; need for automatic aid and regionalized dispatch
Staffing	Inadequate surge capacity; lack of volunteer pipeline and unified staffing model
Apparatus	Aging fleet; no joint replacement schedule or interoperable specs
Facilities	Coverage overlaps and gaps; deferred maintenance
Training	No regional training plan; certification inconsistency
Governance & Finance	No shared accountability or long-range fiscal planning

Staffing Analysis

This staffing analysis compares the North Penn Volunteer Fire Company (NPVFC), Upper Gwynedd Fire Department (UGFD), and Wissahickon Fire Company. It examines current staffing models, attendance levels, and alignment with NFPA 1720 benchmarks. The analysis highlights strengths, weaknesses, and provides strategic recommendations.

Comparative Staffing Overview

Department	Staffing Model	Average Fire Attendance	Staffing Challenges	NFPA 1720 Alignment
NPVFC	Volunteer	Varies; limited daytime	Daytime coverage gaps	Meets suburban (10 in 10); not urban (15 in 9)
UGFD	Volunteer + Stipend + Live-In	Stronger coverage (esp. nights)	Early morning gaps	Closer to suburban/urban compliance
Wissahickon	Volunteer	9–10 avg. per fire	Daytime turnout weaker	Meets suburban (10 in 10); not urban (15 in 9)

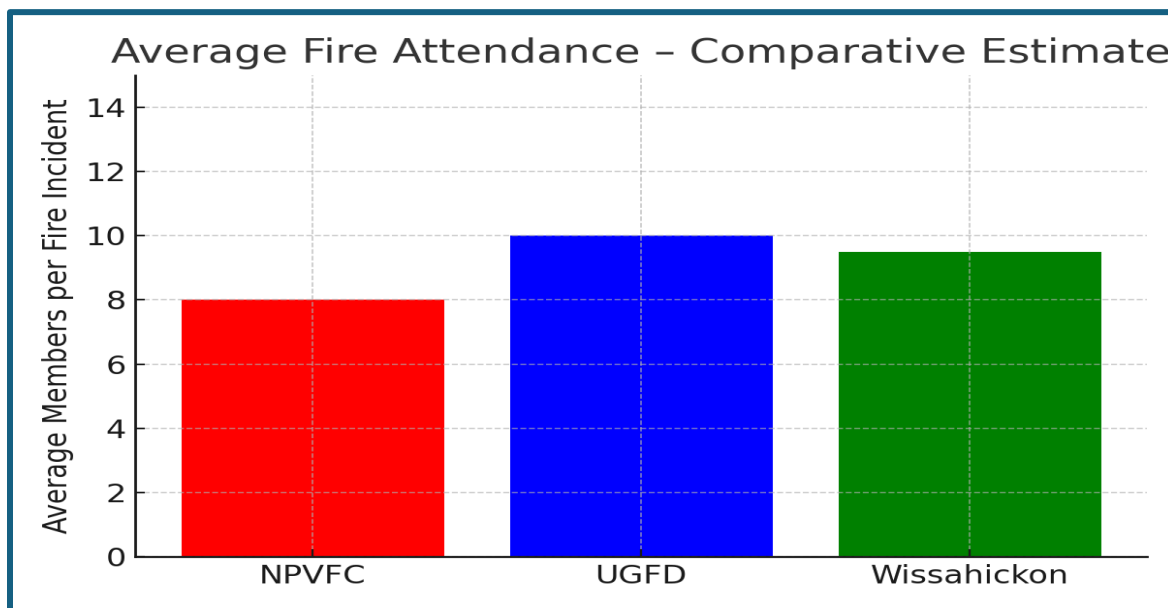


Figure 1: Side-by-side comparison of average fire attendance for NPVFC, UGFD, and Wissahickon.

Note: NPVFC's numbers are impacted by the limitation of single truck responses to surrounding jurisdictions.

Strategic Recommendations

- Expand duty crew schedules to cover daytime staffing gaps.
- Regionalize stipend and live-in programs across departments.
- Create a shared staffing pool with part-time/career members for peak demand coverage.
- Develop regional recruitment and retention incentives (LOSAP, tuition assistance, healthcare).
- Use GIS coverage and CAD analysis to match staffing to risk and response demand.

Workload Analysis

This workload analysis evaluates the call volumes, distributions, and per-member burdens of the North Penn Volunteer Fire Company (NPVFC), Upper Gwynedd Fire Department (UGFD), and Wissahickon Fire Company. It is based on 2021- 2023 incident reports, staffing data, and NFPA 1720 benchmarks, provides insight into workload sustainability and operational risks.

Comparative Workload Overview

Department	Annual Calls	EMS Calls	Fire Calls	Calls/Active Member (est.)	Distinctive Burden
NPVFC	663 (2021) / 682 (2022) / 631 (2023)	55–60%	40–45%	≈13 calls/member/month	EMS-heavy workload, frequent mutual aid
UGFD	≈400–500	≈50%	≈50%	≈10 calls/member/month	Morning coverage gaps, stipend/live-in balance
Wissahickon	579 (2023)	≈50%	≈50%	≈11–12 calls/member/month	Balanced day/night split, heavy

Department	Annual Calls	EMS Calls	Fire Calls	Calls/Active Member (est.)	Distinctive Burden
					training burden

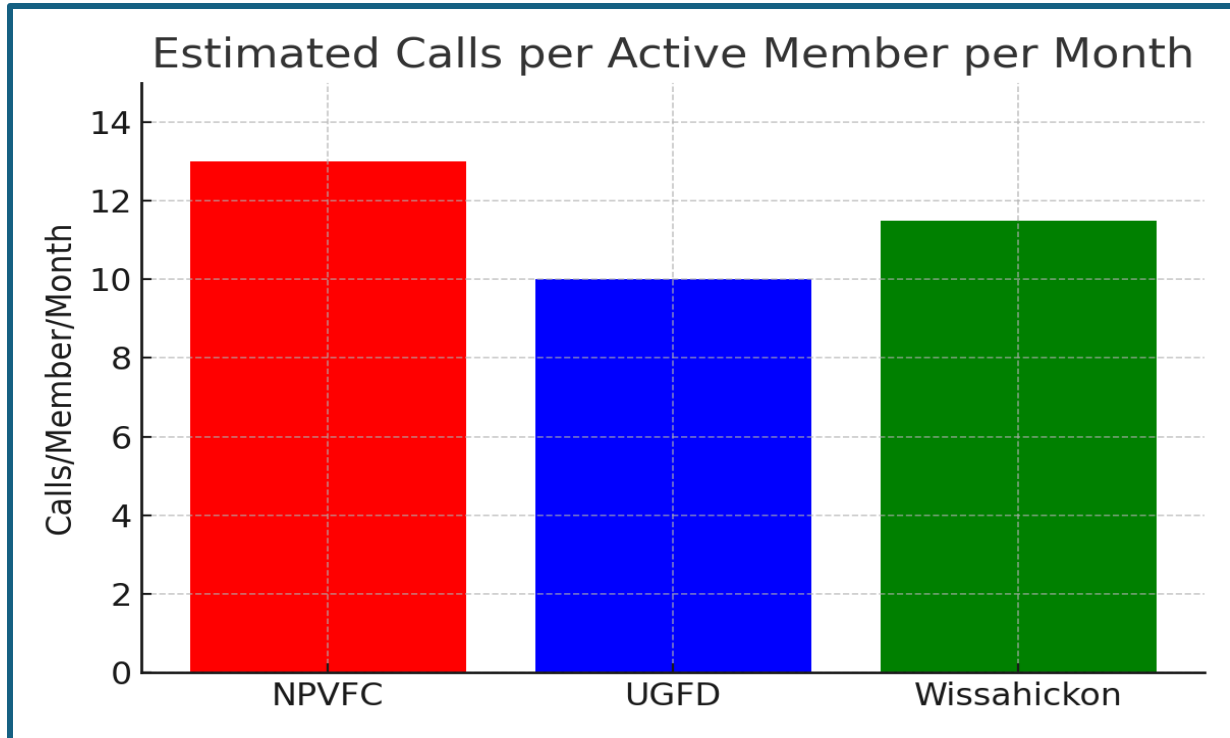


Figure 2: Estimated per-member call workload by department.

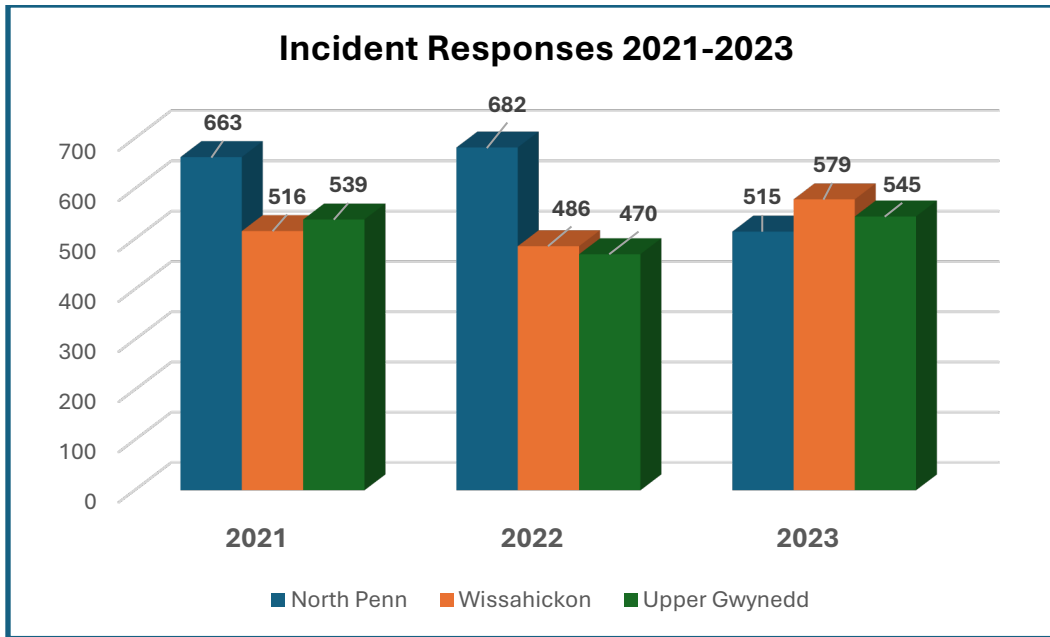


Chart: Incident Response Data from 2021 to 2023

The following analysis evaluates each fire company's incident response data individually.

Upper Gwynedd Township Fire Department

Below is an analysis of the Upper Gwynedd Township Fire Department Incident Response data (2021-2024):

1. Overall Incident Trends

Total incidents:

- 2021: 539
- 2022: 470
- 2023: 545

2024 marks the highest activity level in the dataset.

2. Top Incident Categories (2024)

1. Total Incidents (combined): 699
2. Rescue and Emergency Medical Service: 256
3. False Alarm - False Call: 161

These three categories dominate the workload.

3. Notable Trends by Category

- Rescue & EMS: Significant increase in 2024 (256 vs. 196 in 2023).
- False Alarms: Rising trend, reaching 161 in 2024 (biggest year so far).

- Fires: Increased to 102 in 2024 (from 75 in 2023).

4. Insights

- EMS & medical responses are the main drivers of overall incident volume.
- False alarms remain a major issue and are steadily increasing.
- 2024 shows a large surge in activity compared to previous years, across nearly all categories.

North Penn Volunteer Fire Company (NPVFC)

Below is a response analysis of the North Penn Volunteer Fire Company (NPVFC) from 2019 - 2022:

1. Call Volume Trends

Total Incidents:

- 2021: 663
- 2022: 682
- 2023: 515

2. Top Incident Categories (2022):

- EMS: 400 (59%)
- Fire: 282 (41%)

Trend:

- EMS calls lead every year, with a rising proportion.
- Fire-related incidents have been relatively stable, though they surged slightly in 2021.

3. Mutual Aid and Overlapping Calls

- Aid given vs. received:
 - 2019: 169 given / 35 received
 - 2020: 124 given / 37 received
 - 2021: 122 given / 41 received
 - 2022: 138 given / 40 received
- Overlapping calls:
 - 2019: 14.8%
 - 2020: 17.2%
 - 2021: 19.4%
 - 2022: 20.5%

Trend: Overlapping calls are steadily increasing, suggesting growing strain on resources.

4. Response Times

Average response times (dispatch to arrival):

- 2019: ~7:13
- 2020: ~4:57

- 2021: ~4:48
- 2022: ~4:28

Improvement: Significant reduction in response times over the years, demonstrating improved operational efficiency.

5. Turnout Time (dispatch to enroute)

- 2019: 3:16
- 2020: 1:20
- 2021: 1:04
- 2022: 0:57

Observation: Major improvements in getting apparatus out the door.

6. Time on Scene

- 2019: 32:38
- 2020: 35:59
- 2021: 28:39
- 2022: 26:42

Observation: Scene times shortened after 2020, indicating improved operational effectiveness.

7. Training Hours

- 2019: 5,348 hours
- 2020: 3,582.5 hours
- 2021: 2,986 hours
- 2022: (Not fully documented in the snippet, but significant focus on technical rescue, EMS, and firefighting skills.)

8. Key Challenges and Strengths

Challenges:

- Increasing overlapping calls indicate a need for staffing and resource planning.
- EMS call growth places more demand on personnel.

Strengths:

- Faster turnout and response times year over year.
- Well-trained personnel with thousands of hours in specialized training.

Conclusion

The NPVFC is improving efficiency while handling a rising call volume. However, overlapping incidents and a heavy EMS workload are emerging as operational challenges.

Wissahickon Fire Company

Below is an analysis of the incident response data for Wissahickon Fire Company from 2021 to 2023:

1. Call Volume Trends

Total Calls:

- 2021: 516
- 2022: 486
- 2023: 579

Trend:

- A slight decrease from 2021 to 2022 (-5.8%)
- A significant increase in 2023 (+19.1% compared to 2022).

2. Geographic Distribution

- Lower Gwynedd consistently accounts for the largest share:
 - 2021: 42%
 - 2022: 46%
 - 2023: 47%
- Ambler is the second largest:
 - 2021: 35%
 - 2022: 31%
 - 2023: 31%
- Other areas (Whitemarsh, Whitpain, Upper Dublin) each contribute around 4.6%.

3. Type of Calls

Top categories by year:

2021:

- AFA False: 24%
- AFA Actual: 22%
- Non-commercial buildings: 7%
- Commercial buildings: 5%

2022:

- AFA Actual: 28%
- AFA False: 24%
- Non-commercial buildings: 6%
- Commercial buildings: 6%

2023:

- AFA False: 23%
- AFA Actual: 22%
- Non-commercial buildings: 7%
- Commercial buildings: 5%

Observation: Alarm activations (both false and actual) dominate all three years, making up ~45 - 50% of all calls.

4. Day/Time Patterns

- Busiest days:
 - 2021: Wednesday & Thursday
 - 2022: Friday, Wednesday, Saturday
 - 2023: Tuesday and Friday

- Hourly peaks:
 - Mid-morning (8 - 11 AM) and early evening (6 - 8 PM) are the busiest periods.

5. Attendance and Staffing

- 2021: 6,058 total attendance
- 2022: 5,203 total attendance (drop due to fewer calls)
- 2023: 6,868 total attendance (rise with more calls)

Average firefighters per call:

- 2021: ~11.8
- 2022: ~10.7
- 2023: ~12.0

Observation: Despite higher call volumes in 2023, attendance per call remained strong.

6. Notable Trends

1. False alarms continue to be a major burden.
2. Increase in 2023 responses indicates either population/activity growth or external mutual aid demands.
3. Training hours in 2023 were substantial (3,405 hours), suggesting a focus on readiness.

Recommendations

- Targeted education and inspection to reduce false alarms.
- Continue monitoring resource allocation for peak times (mornings/evenings).
- Investigate growth factors for 2024 to anticipate 2025 needs.

Recommendations to manage workload if regionalization is an option

- Implement regional duty crew schedules to equalize daytime coverage.
- Develop member retention incentives (LOSAP, tuition assistance, stipends) to offset workload.
- Balance training demands regionally to avoid concentrated burdens in one company.
- Track per-member workload quarterly to identify risks of burnout.
- Leverage regionalization to spread workload equitably across departments.

Operational Analysis

This analysis provides a comparative review of the operations, finances, and cultural factors of the Upper Gwynedd Fire Department (UGFD), North Penn Volunteer Fire Company (NPVFC), and Wissahickon Fire Company. It is designed for municipal leaders, fire chiefs, firefighters, and community stakeholders to support decision-making regarding sustainability and regionalization.

Category	Upper Gwynedd Fire Department (UGFD)	North Penn Volunteer Fire Company (NPVFC)	Wissahickon Fire Company
Staffing	Volunteer and stipend-supported; live-in program provides overnight coverage.	Fully volunteer; no stipends; daytime coverage supported by telework flexibility.	Volunteer-based with mix of older and newer members; recruitment/retention challenges.
Apparatus	Well-equipped fleet, though some duplication of apparatus with neighboring companies.	Purchases apparatus with internal funds; limited fleet diversity; duplication identified.	Maintains essential apparatus; relies on mutual aid for specialized services.
Response Times	Generally strong in populated areas; early-morning staffing gaps impact turnout.	Consistent fire response but limited to fire incidents; not dispatched to all call types.	Variable response times; improved with mutual aid integration.
Call Volume/Utilization	Responds broadly to fire, EMS assist, and community calls.	Primarily responds to fire incidents; underutilized for other emergencies.	Moderate call load; mutual aid partnerships increase activity.
Training & Standards	Regular in-house and regional training; emphasis on operational readiness.	Limited structured training: committed members but less formal standardization.	Training meets minimum standards; challenges with consistent participation.
Financial Position	Supported by municipality plus fundraising; stipend program is an ongoing cost.	Strong self-funded apparatus model; relies on community fundraising and tax incentives.	Dependent on municipal support, grants, and fundraising; sustainability concerns.
Community Engagement	Uses modern engagement tools (apps, programs) to connect with residents.	Strong community pride in all-volunteer identity; homeowner tax incentive valued.	Traditional community ties; engagement through events, but

Category	Upper Gwynedd Fire Department (UGFD)	North Penn Volunteer Fire Company (NPVFC)	Wissahickon Fire Company
			less emphasis on digital tools.
Cultural Factors	Adaptable culture; willing to innovate but sensitive to volunteer identity.	Strong pride in independence; resistant to outside staffing or consolidation.	Close-knit volunteer culture: generational divide impacts recruitment and retention.
Strengths	Innovative programs (stipend, live-in); strong municipal ties; solid fleet.	Independence, strong fundraising, pride in volunteer tradition.	Flexible with mutual aid, maintains essential services, strong community loyalty.
Weaknesses	Staffing gaps during early mornings; ongoing costs of stipend model.	Underutilized for non-fire calls; risk of attrition to career departments.	Struggles with retention and training consistency; reliance on outside support.

Summary

- Upper Gwynedd Fire Department (UGFD) has adopted innovative staffing models, including stipends and a live-in program, to strengthen operational coverage. While well-equipped and responsive, they face sustainability concerns with ongoing costs and persistent gaps in early-morning staffing. Their culture is open to change and modernization, supported by municipal ties.
- North Penn Volunteer Fire Company (NPVFC) operates with a strong sense of independence and tradition as a fully volunteer company. They self-fund apparatus purchases and value their all-volunteer identity, but this independence comes with limitations such as reduced call utilization beyond fire responses, risk of losing members to career departments, and resistance to consolidation. Members of the company have communicated an openness to change, collaboration, and evolving with time.
- Wissahickon Fire Company functions with essential resources but relies heavily on mutual aid for specialized services. They maintain moderate call activity, though response reliability varies. Cultural challenges include generational divides and retention difficulties. While deeply rooted in community connections, financial sustainability and consistent training remain concerns.

Overall, the three departments collectively face overlapping issues which are duplication of apparatus, inconsistent training standards, staffing vulnerabilities, and cultural differences. Regionalization or structured service-sharing could address these gaps, reduce duplication, and create a more sustainable and efficient fire service delivery model while preserving each company's community identity.

Recommendations

Staffing & Coverage

- UGFD: Evaluate sustainability of the stipend program and explore regional cost-sharing to offset expenses. Expand live-in program capacity to address early-morning staffing gaps.
- NPVFC: Consider selective use of stipends or part-time staffing during critical response periods to reduce reliance on volunteers alone. Explore participation in shared duty rosters with neighboring companies.
- Wissahickon: Develop target recruitment campaigns, especially for younger members, and strengthen retention through mentorship and leadership development.

Apparatus & Resource Management

- Conduct a joint fleet assessment across all three companies to identify duplication of apparatus and opportunities for shared specialized equipment.
- Establish a regional apparatus replacement schedule to align procurement and reduce long-term costs.
- Explore regional grants and cooperative purchasing agreements.

Training & Standards

- Implement a regional training consortium to standardize skill levels, ensure NFPA compliance, and reduce duplication of training efforts.
- Create joint training schedules that build cross-company interoperability and improve consistency in response.
- Offer leadership and officer development programs to address cultural divides and succession planning.

Financial Sustainability

- UGFD: Secure long-term, municipal commitments for stipend support or gradually shift to a regional funding model.
- NPVFC: Diversify revenue beyond apparatus fundraising (e.g., grants, sponsorships) to reduce financial vulnerability.
- Wissahickon: Pursue stable municipal or shared funding agreements to reduce dependence on fundraising alone.

Community Engagement

- Develop a shared community engagement platform (apps, social media, outreach programs) to improve visibility and highlight the role of all three companies.
- Expand education programs (fire prevention, community risk reduction) as joint initiatives to demonstrate collaboration and increase public trust.

Cultural Alignment

- Acknowledge and respect the all-volunteer pride at NPVFC, while highlighting the benefits of shared services.
- Foster joint cultural initiatives (team building, cross-company events, combined recognition programs) to break down barriers.
- Engage leadership and rank-and-file members in discussions on regionalization to build buy-in and reduce resistance.

Regionalization Pathway

- Begin with incremental service-sharing agreements (training, apparatus deployment, administrative functions).
- Establish a regional governance committee including leaders from all three companies and municipal representatives to guide decision-making.
- Use phased implementation, starting with training alignment and apparatus coordination, followed by financial integration and eventual operational consolidation if supported by stakeholders.

Overall Recommendation: Move toward a structured regionalization model beginning with apparatus management, training, and administrative support. This approach addresses staffing gaps, reduces duplication, improves financial sustainability, and builds a pathway toward long-term consolidation while respecting each company’s cultural identity.

Community Risk Assessment

1. Purpose

To evaluate and classify the fire and life safety risks across the four jurisdictions to inform fire protection strategies, resource allocation, prevention programs, and regional planning.

2. Community Overview

Municipality	Population (Est.)	Area (sq mi)	Land Use Characteristics
Ambler Borough	6,900	0.8	Dense residential, historic downtown, small businesses, light industry

Municipality	Population (Est.)	Area (sq mi)	Land Use Characteristics
North Wales	3,300	0.6	Compact residential, older homes, central business district
Upper Gwynedd	17,100	8.1	Suburban, mixed residential/commercial, large pharmaceutical/industrial campus
Lower Gwynedd	12,100	9.3	Suburban, residential neighborhoods, retirement communities, parks/trails

3. Risk Identification

A. Fire Risk

- Ambler Borough: Older construction with balloon framing creates high potential for rapid fire spread. Mixed-use occupancy with limited setback between buildings.
- North Wales Borough: Aging infrastructure with narrow streets impacting access. Some multi-family dwellings.
- Upper Gwynedd: Higher industrial/commercial risk due to Merck and other facilities. Potential for hazmat incidents.
- Lower Gwynedd: Residential fires are the dominant risk, particularly in senior housing areas.

B. EMS/Medical Risk

- High EMS demand in all communities due to aging populations, especially in Lower Gwynedd (retirement communities). School populations and regional trail systems contribute to pediatric EMS risks and injury potential.

C. Hazardous Materials

- Upper Gwynedd has elevated hazmat risk due to industrial facilities like Merck. Rail lines increase mobile hazmat exposure, especially in Ambler and Upper Gwynedd.

D. Severe Weather & Natural Hazards

Hazard	Impacted Areas	Risk Level
Flooding	Ambler (Wissahickon Creek), Lower Gwynedd (streams)	Moderate
Winter Storms	All areas	High
Heat/Cold Exposure	All areas – elderly populations	High

4. Vulnerable Populations

Group	At-Risk Characteristics
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Ambler Borough, North Wales Borough, Upper Gwynedd Township, Lower Gwynedd Township
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Seniors	Higher fire/EMS risk in Lower Gwynedd retirement communities
Children	Need for prevention education in schools across all jurisdictions
Low-income residents	Ambler, parts of North Wales – limited smoke detectors, aging housing
Non-English Speakers	Ambler and Upper Gwynedd – communication barriers in emergencies

5. Building Stock & Construction Risks

- Aging Infrastructure: North Wales and Ambler have structures >100 years old.
- Multi-Family Housing: Moderate presence in Ambler and North Wales. Fire spread risk.
- Commercial/Industrial Sites: Primarily in Upper Gwynedd
- Wildland-Urban Interface: Minimal, though Lower Gwynedd has wooded subdivisions.

6. Fire Department Capacity Summary

Department	Type	Primary Coverage Area	Staffing Challenges
Wissahickon Fire Co.	Volunteer	Ambler and Lower Gwynedd	Daytime turnout; aging volunteer base
North Penn Fire Co.	Volunteer	North Wales and Lower Gwynedd	Limited personnel for larger incidents
Upper Gwynedd FD	Combination	Upper Gwynedd	Part-time staff bolster capacity

7. Risk Matrix

Threat Type	Ambler	North Wales	Upper Gwynedd	Lower Gwynedd
Structural Fire	High	High	Medium	Medium
EMS Demand	Medium	Medium	High	High
Hazmat	Medium	Low	High	Low
Flooding	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Moderate
Winter Storms	High	High	High	High

Recommendations:

- Install or update smoke detectors in older housing areas (Ambler, North Wales).
- Target fire safety education programs for seniors and school children.
- Expand automatic aid agreements and conduct joint response drills.
- Modernize outdated fire stations, especially in boroughs.
- Enhance GIS floodplain mapping for pre-incident planning.
- Translate emergency preparedness materials into commonly spoken languages.

Community Demographics & Resource Impacts

This impact analysis evaluates how the regionalization of fire service delivery across Upper Gwynedd Township, Lower Gwynedd Township, Ambler Borough, and North Wales Borough will affect service outcomes given each community’s demographics.

The analysis finds that regionalization will provide overall positive impacts, particularly in areas with higher risk demographics, while noting cultural and perception challenges that must be managed.

Community Demographic Overview

Municipality	Population (approx.)	Key Demographics	Risk Factors
Upper Gwynedd Township	17,100	Suburban families, commuters, growth	Traffic-related EMS, residential fire risk
Lower Gwynedd Township	12,100	Aging population, retirement/assisted living	High EMS demand, senior housing fire risk
Ambler Borough	6,500	Dense, diverse, mixed housing & industry	Legacy industrial fires, multi-family housing
North Wales Borough	3,300	Small-town, historic housing	Fire risk in older homes, moderate EMS demand

Projected Impacts

Municipality	Positive Impacts	Potential Risks/Negative Impacts
Upper Gwynedd	Improved reliability, supports suburban growth	Minimal
Lower Gwynedd	Enhanced EMS and CRR for seniors	Minimal
Ambler	Stronger fire prevention and staffing depth	Loss of identity, perception of outside response
North Wales	Resource depth and equity of coverage	Loss of independence perception

Recommendations:

- Hold public forums in Ambler and North Wales to emphasize local representation and identity.
- Develop an equity dashboard to report service delivery by municipality quarterly.
- Maintain station branding while consolidating operations regionally.

- Tailor CRR to demographics - senior safety in Lower Gwynedd, urban fire prevention in Ambler, traffic safety in Upper Gwynedd, historic housing safety in North Wales.
- Invest in volunteer culture integration through leadership workshops and joint training.

Service Sharing & Contracting Options

This analysis outlines service sharing and contracting options for regionalizing fire services across the four municipalities. It provides a spectrum of models ranging from light collaboration to full consolidation. Each option includes advantages, challenges, and recommendations for phased implementation.

Service Sharing Options

Option	Description	Advantages	Challenges
Shared Staffing Pools	Regional duty crew staffed by multiple companies.	Improves coverage, builds trust.	Scheduling coordination, stipend needs.
Joint Training & Certification	Shared training programs and SOPs.	Improves interoperability, reduces duplication.	Requires unified standards, scheduling conflicts.
Shared Apparatus & Specialty Units	One company maintains ladder, another rescue.	Reduces apparatus duplication, maximizes resources.	Perception of loss if one loses apparatus.
Unified Fire Prevention & CRR	One regional fire marshal/code enforcement office.	Consistent IFC enforcement, targeted CRR.	Requires inter-municipal agreement, fee-sharing.

Contracting Options

*Ambler Borough, North Wales Borough, Upper Gwynedd Township, Lower Gwynedd Township
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Option	Description	Advantages	Challenges
Inter-Municipal Service Contracts	One company contract's with another for services.	Legally simple, municipalities retain independence.	Risk of inequitable cost-sharing.
Regional Cost-Sharing Formula	Costs shared by population, call volume, or property value.	Predictable, equitable.	Disagreements over formula.
Contracted Staffing	Hire part-time/career FFs regionally under contract.	Improves daytime coverage, reliable.	Requires funding, volunteer resistance.
Formal Regional Authority	Establish regional fire authority.	Full integration, strong governance.	High resistance requires full buy-in.

Comparative Options Summary

Option	Advantages	Challenges	Best Fit
Shared Staffing Pools	Improves coverage	Scheduling complexity	Immediate gaps
Joint Training	Improves interoperability	Scheduling conflicts	Training alignment
Shared Apparatus	Saves costs	Identity issues	Expensive units
Unified CRR/Prevention	Consistent enforcement	Fee-sharing	High-risk occupancies
Service Contracts	Simple legally	Inequitable costs	Short-term services
Cost-Sharing Formula	Equitable funding	Formula disputes	Long-term budgeting
Contracted Staffing	Reliable coverage	Funding resistance	Daytime coverage
Regional Authority	Full integration	High resistance	Long-term solution

Implementation Plan & Matrix for Service Sharing and Contracting Options

Implementation Matrix

*Ambler Borough, North Wales Borough, Upper Gwynedd Township, Lower Gwynedd Township
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Phase	Time line	Action Item	Lead Stakeholder(s)	Support Stakeholders	Key Resource	Success Indicators
Phase 1 – Immediate (0–12 months)	Short-term	Establish Shared Staffing Pools (pilot weekend duty crew)	Fire Chiefs (UGFD, NPVFC, Wissahickon)	Municipal Managers, Finance Depts.	Scheduling system, stipend budget	Duty crew coverage >90% of shifts
		Launch Joint Training Programs	Training Officers	County Training Center	Shared SOPs, NFPA 1720 standards	80% of volunteers 'complete joint modules
		Begin Unified Fire Prevention/CRR discussions	Township Managers	Code Officials, Fire Marshals	IFC standards, CRR templates	Draft IGA for fire prevention office
Phase 2 – Intermediate (1–3 years)	Mid-term	Develop Shared Apparatus & Specialty Unit Plan	Fire Chiefs Committee	Municipal Leaders	Apparatus inventory, replacement schedule	Reduction in duplication, joint deployment
		Implement Regional Cost-Sharing Formula	Municipal Leaders	Finance Committees	Demographic & call data	Formula adopted by all four municipalities
		Pilot Contracted Staffing for Daytime Coverage	Regional Staffing Committee	Union/Volunteer reps	HR, payroll, legal counsel	Day staffing reliability >95%
Phase 3 – Long-Term (3–5 years)	Long-term	Expand Unified CRR/Fire Prevention Office	Regional Authority Exploratory Group	Municipal Solicitors	Inter-municipal agreements	Regional office operational
		Formalize Inter-Municipal Service Contracts	Township/Borough Councils	Fire Company Boards	Legal counsel, insurance	Contracts signed & enforced
		Evaluate Feasibility of Formal Regional Fire Authority	Regional Task Force	Community Stakeholders	Governance study, legal framework	Decision on authority formation
Phase 4 – Future (5+ years)	Strategic	Establish Regional Fire Authority (if supported)	Elected Officials	Fire Chiefs, Community	Governance charter, bylaws, funding plan	Authority established & operational

Recommendations:

- Start Small, Build Trust. Pilot staffing pools and joint training as 'quick wins.'
- Use Data to Drive Cost-Sharing. Agree early on metrics (population, call volume, property value).

- Phased Funding Strategy. Begin with stipends and contracted staffing, then scale toward a regional budget.
- Cultural Alignment. Invest in leadership and community engagement to mitigate resistance.
- Evaluate Governance Options. Keep the regional authority as a long-term target but focus first on practical cooperation.

Cost Benefit Analysis – Fire Service Regionalization

1. Cost Categories

Category	Description	Estimated Impact
Personnel Costs	Stipends for volunteers, contracted day staff, potential career FFs	↑ Short-term costs; stabilized long-term
Training Costs	Unified training, joint certifications, shared SOPs	Neutral; efficiencies offset upfront investments
Apparatus & Equipment	Shared specialty units, reduced duplication, joint purchasing power	↓ Significant long-term savings
Administrative Costs	Legal fees, inter-municipal agreements, governance studies	↑ Initial costs; ↓ after consolidation
Facilities	No new stations, but potential minor upgrades for regional use	Neutral to ↓ depending on shared use
Technology	Scheduling software, shared records, regional CAD interfaces	↑ upfront investment; ↓ long-term duplication

2. Benefit Categories

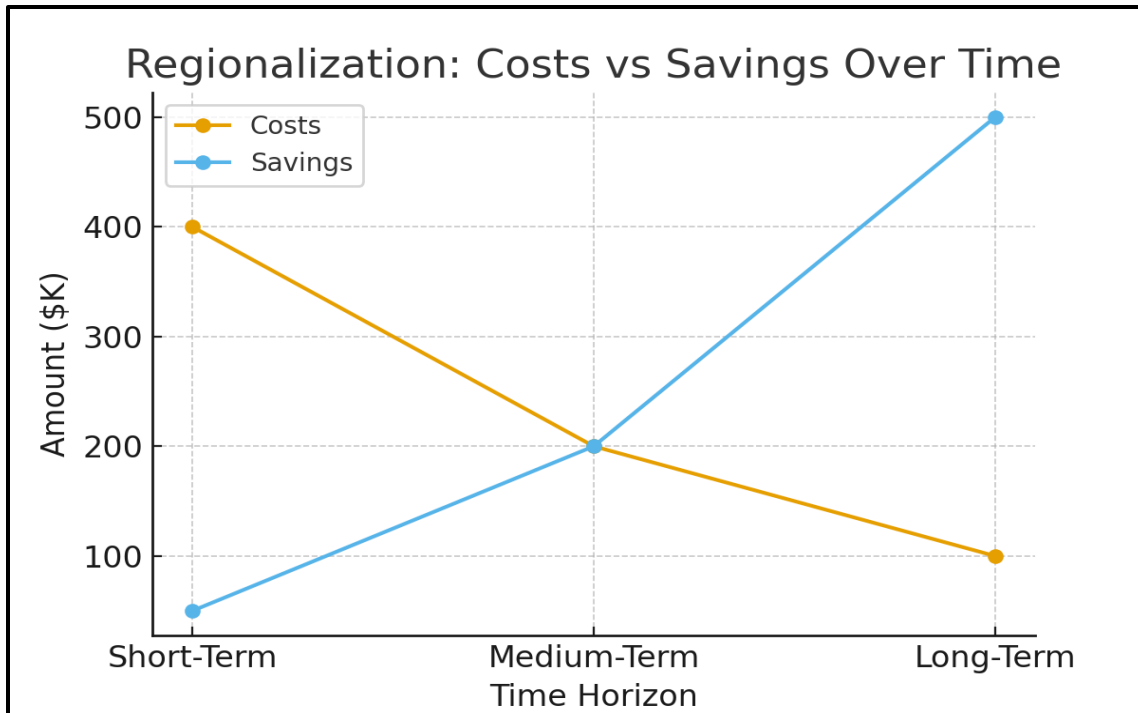
Category	Description	Value Added
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Operational Efficiency	Improved coverage, reduced response gaps, shared staffing	↑ Faster response, NFPA compliance
Financial Savings	Joint apparatus purchase, reduced duplication, bulk training	↑ Long-term cost reduction
Service Reliability	Contracted staffing for daytime coverage, regional duty crews	↑ Predictable service delivery
Community Risk Reduction	Unified CRR/Fire Prevention Office	↑ Consistent enforcement, safer community
Governance & Planning	Regional cost-sharing formula, long-term budget predictability	↑ More equitable and sustainable
Volunteer Support & Retention	Stipend program, shared workload, improved culture	↑ Reduced burnout, higher retention

3. Quantitative Analysis (Projected 5-Year Outlook)

Factor	Current Model (Status Quo)	Regionalized Model	Net Effect
Annual Personnel Costs	\$0–\$50K (stipends minimal)	\$200K–\$400K (staffing/contracted support)	↑ Short-term increase
Apparatus Costs	\$3–4M (duplicative replacement cycles)	\$1.5–2M (shared purchases)	↓ \$1–2M over 5 years
Training Costs	\$200K (individual programs, duplication)	\$150K (joint training, unified SOPs)	↓ \$50K
Administrative/Governance	\$50K (per township)	\$150K (shared regional budget)	Neutral (redistributed)
Response Time (NFPA 1720 compliance)	60–70% compliance	85–90% compliance	↑ Service reliability
Community Risk Reduction	Inconsistent enforcement	Consistent regional CRR	↑ Public safety

4. Cost–Benefit Graph



5. Net Assessment

- Short-Term (1–3 years): Costs will increase due to contracted staffing, legal/administrative set-up, and technology investments. Net Effect: Higher expenses, but immediate improvements in coverage, compliance, and safety.
- Medium-Term (3–5 years): Savings accrue through reduced apparatus duplication, cost-sharing formulas, and bulk purchasing. Net Effect: Break-even or moderate savings, with better reliability and reduced risk exposure.
- Long-Term (5+ years): If a regional fire authority is established, structural savings and governance efficiencies outweigh costs. Net Effect: Significant cost savings, predictable budgets, higher public safety outcomes.

6. Recommendation

Proceed with phased regionalization:

1. Begin with shared staffing pools, joint training, and cost-sharing formula.
2. Introduce contracted staffing for daytime coverage.
3. Evaluate feasibility of a formal regional authority within 5 years.

Benefits of Consolidation

Consolidating the Upper Gwynedd, Lower Gwynedd, Ambler, and North Wales fire services into a single regional department offers numerous potential benefits. These range from improvements in operational efficiency and effectiveness, cost savings, and enhanced service delivery to intangible gains in standardization and firefighter development. Outlined below are the key benefits:

Enhanced Operational Efficiency & Effectiveness

A regionalized fire department would operate under one unified command and organizational structure, leading to more efficient deployment of personnel and apparatus. Elimination of duplicate responses and overlapping jurisdictions means the closest station responds to an incident without regard to municipal boundaries, thus reducing response times and ensuring a faster attack on emerging fires. Currently, as discussed, the three separate companies often dispatch multiple units to achieve adequate staffing. Under consolidation, the department can dispatch the right combination of units and staff immediately. This streamlining improves the effective response force arriving in the critical early minutes of an incident.

Efficiency gains also come from integrated incident command. Instead of three fire chiefs from different organizations potentially showing up and coordinating on the fly, one on-duty regional chief officer would take command with clear authority. This unified command structure is more effective in managing resources at chaotic scenes, leading to better outcomes and firefighter safety. The Bensalem Township consolidation reinforces this. Going from six independent companies to one “with one set of leadership, one set of operational procedures” made the service more efficient. A similar outcome can be expected. Decisions are made faster, communications are simplified, and everyone operates on the same game plan.

Moreover, consolidation would allow balancing of resource utilization. Busy stations (like WFC’s Ambler station) could get support from volunteers at less busier stations, preventing burnout and ensuring critical tasks (like truck checks, equipment maintenance) are always covered by someone. The department could institute a duty rotation where volunteers from any of the four current areas staff each other’s stations during known low-staffing periods, something that independent companies cannot easily mandate. With a larger roster (the combined volunteer force), a regional fire department can also better handle multiple simultaneous incidents. For example, one station’s crew can tackle a fire alarm while another manages an EMS incident, without both calls falling on the same small group of people.

To sum up, by pooling staffing and apparatus, a regional fire department can respond to incidents more efficiently, improve safety, and communicate more effectively. Lives and property can be better protected when a strong, unified force is available rather than smaller fragmented teams.

Potential Cost Savings

Fire service consolidation often yields cost savings or cost avoidance opportunities eventually, primarily through economies of scale and reduced duplication. One immediate area is administrative and overhead costs. Instead of three separate sets of officers, training programs, insurance policies, and

back-office functions, one department can consolidate these. For instance, a regional fire department would have a single insurance policy for liability and vehicle insurance, potentially at a lower group rate than three separate ones. Financial administration like accounting and auditing would be unified. One treasurer or finance officer instead of three and one annual audit instead of three.

Another significant cost saving comes from joint purchasing and procurement. As a single entity, the department can purchase bulk equipment (from fire hoses to breathing apparatus to uniforms) at better prices. Standardization on gear will allow larger orders and multi-year contracts that drive down per-unit costs. Maintenance contracts for apparatus and facilities can be streamlined, e.g., one service agreement for all apparatus testing (pumps, ladders) could be negotiated at a discount for volume. Furthermore, grants and funding opportunities may increase. Many state and federal grants favor consolidated or regional projects, viewing them as high impact. A regional fire department could apply for a single grant to cover, say, a new radio system or personal protective equipment for all volunteers, rather than three departments competing (against each other) for those funds.

Elimination of redundant apparatus over time could save capital and maintenance costs. For example, the region currently has more engines than truly needed for the typical call volume (the combined department might not need to maintain five or six front-line pumpers). It could potentially retire one older engine and still meet service needs with the remaining fleet, thereby saving on upkeep and eventual replacement cost. Similarly, instead of each company budgeting separately for a new truck at separate times, the regional entity can do holistic fleet management, potentially reducing the total number of reserve or specialty units needed. A study by the Pennsylvania Fire & Emergency Services Institute found that overlapping apparatus in neighboring volunteer departments can waste money that could be used more efficiently with a consolidated approach.

Shared facilities are another area that can benefit from consolidation. While all current stations would remain, costly expansions or renovations could be avoided if the regional department optimizes usage. For instance, if one station has excess capacity, the department could store a reserve apparatus there rather than building an addition elsewhere. Or, instead of each company upgrading their radio dispatch base separately, one upgrade covers all.

One of the most visible cost savings is in training and recruitment costs. A unified training program can reduce duplicate instructor fees and facility rental costs. Today, if each company runs its own rookie orientation, that is three sessions. A combined recruitment class would use resources once. Also, joint training can happen in one location with one set of fuel and materials, benefiting all. Recruitment outreach can be consolidated into one campaign covering all four communities, rather than each company spending money on separate advertising and materials.

Finally, consider financial leverage with municipalities; rather than four local governments each funding “their” fire service to varying degrees, they could pool funds, possibly yielding enough to hire a few strategic paid staff (like a daytime driver or training officer) without increasing overall spending, because money is used more flexibly. Even if immediate dollar savings are not huge (some consolidations primarily reinvest savings into service improvements), there is a clear cost avoidance benefit. The region will need to spend on fire services inevitably (apparatus aging, stations needing repair, etc.), and doing so collaboratively can avoid duplication and excess. For example, instead of three separate ladder trucks for each area (which would be extremely expensive), they can share the

cost of one properly maintained ladder that covers all areas, which they already do informally but will formalize the cost-sharing in consolidation.

In summary, while some upfront investment may be required to merge (IT systems integration, rebranding), long-term financial efficiency is a compelling benefit. This can either reduce the taxpayer's burden or allow the same funding to stretch further, providing better service.

Improved Service Delivery & Resource Optimization

From the community's perspective, the ultimate measure of success is improved service including faster response, more reliable coverage, and enhanced capabilities. A regional fire department can optimize resource deployment across the entire area. That means if one section of the region is temporarily high-risk or busy (say, a severe storm hitting Ambler with multiple calls), the unified department can reallocate units from less busier areas (like Upper Gwynedd) to cover or assist automatically. Residents would see more consistent coverage. The service area is larger but also the pool of resources is larger, providing a safety net of depth.

Broader coverage also allows the department to implement specialized response units. For example, with all four municipalities' support, the regional department could establish a dedicated duty crew program where a team of volunteers rotates to be on station during weekday daylight hours, moving among the stations. This was difficult for any one company to sustain, but regionally you have a bigger volunteer base to draw from for such staffing. The result is improved weekday response times and even the ability to handle two simultaneous calls without outside help, which currently might not always be the case.

Specialized units and services are another benefit. WFC brings technical rescue expertise. UGTFD brings hazmat/industrial firefighting familiarity (Merck). NPVFC brings close-knit community engagement, ladder company operations and more EMS-oriented experience. Under one roof, these specialties can be formalized into units (e.g., a Regional Technical Rescue Team, a Hazardous Materials support unit, a Water Rescue unit), with membership open to any volunteer in the department. This means citizens have access to a more diverse array of emergency services. A unified department might, for instance, be able to start a tactical EMS or rescue task force that none of the smaller ones would have fielded alone.

Unified operations can also improve outcomes through quicker and stronger coordinated firefighting. With more firefighters arriving as a team, critical tasks like search and rescue of occupants, ventilation of smoke, and initial fire attack can be conducted concurrently rather than sequentially or waiting for the second-due company. This can stop fires faster and reduce fire damage. It also improves firefighter safety by having adequate personnel on scene to meet OSHA "two-in, two-out" rules and rapid intervention team requirements without delay.

Another service improvement is in dispatch and coverage for large-scale incidents. A consolidated department can better manage major disasters (like a massive storm or multi-alarm fire) because it can internally mobilize all stations and perhaps staff reserve apparatus quickly, whereas separate companies might each only cover their own jurisdiction and rely on fragmented mutual aid communications. One regional incident action plan can be executed seamlessly.

Unified command and unified training mean that when crews from different former companies work together, they do so under identical protocols. This yields smoother on-scene teamwork and quicker problem resolution. As a goal cited in a Florida consolidation: unify and equalize service so that whichever crew arrives, the community gets the same high standard of care. In this case, a homeowner in North Wales should get the same level of response (in terms of personnel and ability) as one in Ambler or Gwynedd. A regional department can standardize training, equipment, and SOPs to ensure that.

Finally, service delivery can be enhanced through public outreach and prevention. Instead of three separate fire prevention programs (which might have varied intensity), the regional fire department could create a robust public education unit that covers all schools, businesses, and community events in the area. Sharing resources (like fire safety trailers, educational materials) means each community could get more fire prevention attention than before. A single fire marshal's office for the region could ensure uniform code enforcement and more frequent inspections of high-risk properties, thus preventing incidents.

In summary, consolidation promises a stronger and more reliable fire/rescue service including quicker response in some cases, more firefighters on scene to do the job, fuller coverage even during multiple calls, and expanded special services coverage (rescue, EMS assist). From a resident's point of view, this translates to improved safety and potentially improved insurance ratings (a more effective fire service can lead to a better ISO PPC, which can lower insurance premiums for property owners).

Standardization of Training, Equipment, and Protocols

Bringing the departments together would entail creating common standards for every aspect of operations, which is a benefit because it drives consistency and professionalism. Standardized training means every firefighter in the regional department will meet the same rigorous benchmarks, attend the same type of drills, and be qualified on the same equipment. For firefighters, this reduces confusion and builds trust. They know that their colleague from another station has the training to operate the fire attack line or ladder a building in the same way they have. It also makes joint operations safer because everyone follows the same incident protocol and safety procedures.

From an equipment standpoint, standardization is a huge win. Under one department, all apparatus equipped will be uniform. This will include same hose thread types, same pump panel layouts (where possible), and same model of extrication tools. This means in an emergency, a firefighter from any station can jump on any apparatus and be familiar with it. It streamlines maintenance (mechanics only need to stock parts for one brand of, say, SCBA instead of two or three) and training (you can have one apparatus operator training program and certify drivers who can drive any engine in the fleet, not just their home company's).

Standard operating guidelines (SOGs) will be unified. This covers how to approach fires, how to manage mayday situations, how to perform ventilation, and all procedural elements. Many of the obstacles faced in a consolidation are cultural and about differences in "how we do things." Standardization eliminates those differences by forging a new, best-practice way of doing things for everyone. It might require compromise and adoption of innovative ideas, but it ensures everyone is on the same page. A direct benefit is a reduction in errors and miscommunication. For example, radio

protocol will be uniform, avoiding situations where one company's firefighters use terminology or codes that another company might not immediately understand.

When it comes to firefighter certifications and performance standards, a regional department can enforce one set of requirements. This could elevate the overall training level. For instance, if one company currently only requires Firefighter I certification and another encourages Firefighter II, the regional department can set Firefighter II as the standard goal for all interior firefighters. Additionally, all drivers can be mandated to complete an EVOC (Emergency Vehicle Operator Course) and pump operations class. These are easier to implement with one organization and often met with less resistance because it is framed as professional development for the unified team.

Safety practices will also become standardized. This means consistent use of accountability tags, incident rehab procedures (ensuring all firefighters get rest and medical checks on long incidents), and safety equipment (like PASS alarms, protective gear standards) across the board. The chance of an oversight or safety lapse becomes less likely when there is one safety officer or committee overseeing all and enforcing one policy.

Standardization of equipment extends to personal protective equipment (PPE) also. A regional department can outfit all members with the same make/model of turnout gear, which is both a safety and identity benefit. Everyone looks like part of one team, and gear quality can be uniform. No fire company is "making do" with older gear due to budget differences.

Lastly, record-keeping and data becomes standardized. Fire incident reporting (to the state and NFIRS) is recorded in one system and training records stored in one database. This makes analysis and process improvement easier. One can spot trends and issues across the region rather than in silos. For example, if response times in a certain zone are lagging, the department can notice and adjust, while separate small companies might not catch those patterns as readily.

Standardization fosters a culture of consistency and reduces variability in service quality. Residents will know that regardless of which station's crew arrives, they are equally well-trained and equipped. This is likely to improve the reputation of the service and potentially attract new volunteers who are drawn to a larger, well-resourced organization with clear standards.

Opportunities for Career Development and Retention

One often overlooked benefit of consolidating is the positive impact on firefighter morale, retention, and even limited career opportunities. While the regional department would remain volunteer, it can create a more structured environment with a clear rank structure and advancement path. Volunteers, especially younger ones, often seek growth and recognition. In a larger department, there can be more officer positions (lieutenants, captains) to aspire to, specialized team leader roles, and training officer roles. A volunteer who might feel "stuck" in a smaller company because senior positions are held for decades might find more chances to take on leadership in a regional department as new units and positions emerge. This can improve retention by keeping members engaged and invested in moving up the ranks.

Additionally, a regional department can formalize a Length of Service Award Program (LOSAP) or other incentive programs across all four communities, which might be financially sustainable only with the larger tax base combined. LOSAPs (a small retirement pension or stipend for years of service) are known to help with retention in volunteer services.

For those interested in emergency services careers, a regional department could potentially offer part-time or full-time roles that did not exist before. For example, it might hire a Training Coordinator, Recruitment Officer, or a Maintenance Technician for apparatus. These positions could be filled by experienced volunteers from within, giving them a career in what was previously strictly a volunteer job.

A combined organization also fosters a mentorship culture beyond one station. Experienced volunteers from one area can mentor new recruits from another station by spreading knowledge and building camaraderie. The diverse mix of calls and training available (industrial at Merck, urban in Ambler, residential in suburbs) provides a richer experience for firefighters, which can keep them engaged.

For recruitment, a regional approach allows more targeted outreach and formal junior firefighter or explorer programs across the region's high schools. A unified recruitment message could draw in more candidates. Once on board, new volunteers would go through a unified academy or orientation, forging bonds with peers from all towns and boroughs. This builds a sense of belonging to something bigger, which can be a powerful retention factor. People often volunteer not just out of duty but for fellowship and pride. A larger department can amplify that pride (like being part of a big sports team vs a pickup game, it feels more official and exciting).

One can also consider educational and career development resources. For example, a bigger department might have the means to reimburse college tuition for fire science, send members to advanced training conferences, or bring in specialized instructors for classes, benefits that smaller budgets could not afford. These opportunities for growth and learning make volunteers more likely to stay (and to be highly competent, which loops back to service quality).

Finally, by sharing the workload among more members, consolidation can reduce burnout. Instead of the same small group responding to every call, now there is a larger roster to share response duties. A volunteer who can manage their time better and not feel overburdened is more likely to remain active longer.

In summary, a regional fire department offers a more robust environment for personal and professional development of its members. It can implement structured promotional pathways, offer broader experience, and deploy incentives that improve both recruitment and retention. As noted in general consolidation goals, one aim is often to create a setup that volunteers find attractive to join and rewarding to be part of, thus slowing the decline in numbers, and even boosting membership through better organizational reputation and support.

These benefits combined, along with operational improvements, cost efficiencies, better service, standardization, and human resource enhancements, make a compelling case for why consolidation is worth sincere consideration. However, to fully appreciate the consolidation equation, one must also address the challenges and risks involved, described in the next section.

Challenges and Risks of Consolidation

While the potential benefits of consolidation are significant, this initiative also comes with substantial challenges and risks that must be carefully considered and managed. Consolidating multiple volunteer fire companies involves not just merging organizations, but also blending people, cultures, and politics. Below the key challenges are discussed.

Personnel and Cultural Integration Issues

One of the greatest challenges in merging fire companies is integrating the people and the unique cultures and traditions of each organization. Each fire company has its own identity, history, and way of doing things. There may be a sense of pride (even rivalry) attached to the individual company names (“Station 7”, “Station 62”, “Station 80”) that does not easily transfer to a new banner. Some members, especially older members, may feel a loss of identity or fear that their legacy is being erased. As consolidation experts note, “people losing control of their little piece of the pie” and loss of tradition are huge obstacles. Longtime volunteers might resist changes to uniforms, unit designations, or even paint color of apparatus if it differs from their tradition. For example, if one company’s trucks are all white and another is red, choosing one scheme could upset the other group over symbolism. These might seem like small issues, but the name of the station and the color of the apparatus can be the biggest obstacle.

Differing operational cultures is also a factor. Let’s say Wissahickon has a more structured, formal style while North Penn operates more informally like a tight-knit club. Merging them might create friction if not managed with empathy. Seniority and leadership roles will come into question (e.g. who will be the Chief of the new department)? The current chiefs of WFC, NPVFC, and UGTFD may have to rearrange roles (Chief, Deputy, etc.), and someone may feel passed over. The rank-and-file might have loyalty to their current chief and be skeptical of taking orders from a different leader.

Volunteer morale can suffer if integration is not managed carefully. There is a risk that some volunteers will simply walk away rather than adapt to a new system, especially if they perceive it as a “takeover” by another company or by the municipality. In consolidation attempts elsewhere, loss of membership during the transition is a real concern. There must be an acknowledgement that attrition might occur. The goal is to minimize it by involving volunteers in planning and preserving the best aspects of each company’s culture.

Another personnel challenge involves differing pay scales or benefits. In this case, all firefighters are volunteers, so direct pay is not an issue. However, if any company had certain incentive programs others did not (say, a length-of-service award or local tax credit differences), aligning those could cause perceived winners and losers. Additionally, one company might be used to more municipal support (UGTFD volunteers might be used to the township providing more support) while another relies heavily on fundraising and autonomy. Volunteers from the latter might fear losing autonomy or being “forced” into something like duty shifts or stricter requirements that they did not sign up for originally. Changes in membership requirements (like training hours or meeting participation) could alienate firefighters if implemented without buy-in.

Fire Police and Auxiliary integration is also something to consider. These dedicated support members often have their own organization within a fire company. They will also need merging (like combining two fire-police squads with different captains).

Cultural integration is often cited as the hardest part of consolidation. Trust must be developed among members of entities that were previously separate. Egos inevitably come into play. As one PA fire officer said, “egos are the biggest obstacles.” Overcoming the mindset of “us vs them” is critical, and it takes time and strong, sensitive leadership.

Governance and Political Complexities

Consolidating fire services across four municipalities introduces significant governance challenges. You are creating a new intergovernmental structure or authority to oversee the regional fire department. This raises questions such as how decisions will be made and who has ultimate authority (a commission of officials from each municipality or does one municipality take lead). There is potential for political turf wars over control and influence. Each municipal government will want to ensure its constituents are fairly represented and not subsidizing others unfairly. Negotiating the inter-municipal agreement can be complex. Everything from budget contributions, to liability, to asset ownership must be decided and codified.

Political will is also a huge factor. Elected officials may fear backlash from constituents. For instance, members of the community might accuse them of “giving away” their town’s fire company or worry that one area will lose out (like “Will our local station close? Will our response get slower because the department might favor another area?”). Politicians must be sensitive to those concerns and any change in emergency services can become a hot-button issue in community meetings. Also, as pointed out in literature, local officials sometimes shy away from consolidations due to potential negative publicity, especially if any tax changes are involved. If consolidation necessitates equalizing funding, one or more towns might have to raise their contributions (or even enact a fire tax). That is politically difficult.

Another challenge of governance is the legal mechanism. Pennsylvania does not have independent fire districts with taxing authority like some states. Therefore, the likely model is either a Council of Governments (COG) arrangement or one municipality (the largest, Upper Gwynedd) could act as the lead agency employing the firefighters and contracting service to others. Each model has drawbacks. For example, a COG or authority means a new bureaucracy and ensuring each party adheres to agreements. A lead-agency model can breed resentment if others feel they have less input. There will need to be clear governance documents delineating how decisions are made (e.g., a Fire Commission with equal voting from each municipality, weighted by population).

Asset ownership and allocation are other complexities. This includes determining who will own the fire stations and apparatus in the new organization. Currently, volunteer companies and/or municipalities own various pieces. Transferring these to the new entity might face legal hurdles, especially if a volunteer company incorporated as a nonprofit must dissolve or hand over its assets. Membership of those companies must agree. There might be debts or financial obligations (loans on trucks) that need to be settled or transferred, which is legally intricate. Each municipality will also want assurance on what happens if the regional venture fails, or someone pulls out. These need addressing in agreements (exit clauses, asset reversion).

Differing policies and laws across municipalities may also exist. For example, one township's volunteer relief association might have bylaws that differ from another's. Consolidation could require merging relief associations or at least coordinating them under one umbrella (the PFESI notes multiple relief associations merging is possible but tricky). All municipalities must jointly petition to the state for recognition of a single relief association and ensure state aid distribution is adjusted accordingly.

Finally, there is community oversight and expectations. Politicians and fire administrators will need to set up a governance structure that includes accountability (regular reports to each municipal governing body, or a joint oversight committee). This can be complicated to manage. Instead of one boss (one council) to answer to, the fire chief might be required to answer to a multi-town board, which could complicate decision-making and slow down processes if not well structured.

In summary, forging a consensus among four local governments and a volunteer membership on governance is a heavy lift. Without strong leadership and a spirit of compromise, consolidation could falter due to governance disputes. Municipal leaders must be proactive in addressing these in a consolidation plan. Suggestions will be offered in the recommendations.

Funding Models and Equitable Distribution of Costs

Equitable funding is both a challenge and a potential point of contention. Currently, the cost of fire protection is not evenly distributed among the four communities, with Upper Gwynedd likely spending the most (with apparatus purchases, fire marshal salary, etc.), Lower Gwynedd and Ambler contribute moderate amounts, and North Wales, being small, contributes less and relies more on volunteer fundraising and township help. In a consolidated department, all four must pool funds to support the regional service. Determining each municipality's share is tricky. Common formulas include using population, assessed property values, call volume, or various combinations as a basis. Each option can be contentious. For example, a town with a high tax base (like Lower Gwynedd) might end up paying more if based on property value, which they might see as subsidizing others. If based on call volume, Ambler might pay more because of the number of calls that occur there (mostly alarms), but Ambler is smaller and less wealthy than the townships, raising fairness issues. Decision makers will have to craft a funding formula that all see as fair. One formula suggests a blend, e.g., 50% of population, 50% by assessed value, with adjustments for risk factors.

There is also the transition of volunteer company funds. The independent companies have their own budgets, reserves, and fund drive proceeds. Will those funds be merged into the new department's budget or kept for specific station use? Volunteers who raised money might be sensitive to "their money" being used elsewhere. Additionally, donors might be confused or concerned. Thoughts may include, "If I donate to the regional fire department, will it still help my local station?" Ensuring transparency in funding use will be critical to maintain donation levels. A risk is that if communities think the fire service is now fully government-run regionally, they may donate less, assuming taxes cover everything. This has happened in consolidations where fundraising dropped post-merge, potentially straining budgets if not accounted for.

Another risk is unforeseen costs of consolidation. Merging can have upfront costs like new uniforms, resigning stations, integrating radio systems, or equalizing pay for any employees or adding benefits for volunteer's region-wide (like a LOSAP or insurance coverages) to level the field. Costs that are not anticipated could cause budget overruns that upset the municipalities or taxpayers.

Ensuring equitable input vs output is a fine balance. The negotiation of contributions will require compromise. One town could pay a bit more than a strict formula for the first few years to ease others in, or there are caps/increases phased. Each municipality's elected officials will scrutinize if they are paying more than before and if so, demand justification via improved service. If one is paying less (like North Wales would pay more than it does now for full-time coverage, since now others would help carry them more), others might feel resentful if not handled properly.

Finally, any introduction of a new tax or fee specifically for fire (like a dedicated fire services fee) can trigger public debate. It will be important to communicate that any cost shifts are to ensure a high-quality, possibly even more cost-effective, service overall. Additionally, highlighting successes elsewhere can help. (e.g., Bensalem's consolidation was justified partly by need due to volunteer decline, not necessarily immediate cost savings, but this was framed as necessary for ensuring effective fire response which resonates better than cost arguments alone).

In summary, designing a funding model that is equitable and sustainable is a complex challenge. It will require financial analysis and negotiation, and even then, there is risk. If one town faces budget issues, will they reduce their share and thus hurt the whole? The government must mandate contributions strongly to mitigate that risk.

Logistical Challenges (Stations, Apparatus Interoperability)

Beyond people and money, there are significant logistical details to work through in a consolidation:

- **Station Locations and Utilization:** There are four stations. Consolidation raises questions such as, "Do you maintain all four in the long term?" Yes, in the beginning, as each covers distinct areas needed for quick response. However, in the future, there might be talk about building a new centralized station or closing an under-used one. This can be very controversial. For example, if call volume suggests that one of WFC's two stations might be co-located in a new facility with North Penn's, some communities would resist losing the station in their backyard. Even if no closures occur, sharing resources between stations will require some infrastructure work, e.g. ensuring all stations have compatible radio and alerting systems (Montgomery County dispatch is likely to handle that, but internal station alerting might vary), aligning policies like station hours or public access.
- **Apparatus reassignments:** In a unified fleet, the department might decide to move apparatus around for optimal coverage (put the Quint in Ambler where more multi-story buildings are, station the heavy rescue centrally). However, moving a beloved piece of apparatus out of its historic house can upset volunteers ("that is our engine, why is it being relocated to another station?"). Conversely, there might be duplication leading to a reserve engine taken out of service. Volunteers may see that as losing capability even if it is redundant. Also, apparatus standardization might not be immediate. Different models of engines mean different training needs persist for a while, which is a logistical training burden until older ones are replaced by standardized models.
- **Equipment compatibility:** While all companies use the same county radio network, there could be differences in communications gear. If one company's radios are older, upgrading them all to one single standard could cost money and time. Ensuring all firefighters have standardized personal protective equipment and that things like fire hose coupling sizes are standardized, is a project. Merging inventories of spare parts, tools, and ensuring every station has what it needs

(and not four of the same rarely used tool now under one dept) is a massive inventory management task initially.

- **Dispatch protocols:** Montgomery County 9-1-1 will need to reprogram their run cards for one department with multiple stations. There might be initial confusion or glitches. (e.g., a call on a border that used to trigger two companies now should only trigger one department's multiple stations). The transition period might be experienced by over or under dispatching until ironed out. That is a risk to service temporarily if not done properly, though manageable by thorough planning and testing.
- **Records and IT integration:** Each fire company could have separate systems for incident reporting, training records, membership data, even different software. Those systems must be integrated into one system (or a few integrated systems). If any company uses older methods (paper or incompatible software), that is a challenge to bring software up to standard. Also, communications IT like email lists, website, need combining.
 - The department will need a new name and brand. Designing that and implementing it (new signage, website, social media, uniforms, truck decals) is a logistic project that can also stir debate and must be managed professionally to maintain public awareness of who to call or donate to.
- **Legal consolidation of assets and organizations:** As mentioned, there would be a need to transfer property titles and merge corporate entities if the volunteer companies were separately incorporated. For example, the Wissahickon Fire Company and North Penn Fire Company might each need to have their membership vote to dissolve and convey assets to the new regional entity (depending on the structure). There might be restrictions (assets bought with relief association funds or grants might have stipulations on how they can be transferred).
- **Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) creation:** The actual work of writing one unified SOP manual will be intensive, and until completed and everyone is trained, there may be confusion in the interim. Firefighters might inadvertently fall back to old protocols out of habit. Drilling the new procedures across the whole department will take time. Until then, in early consolidation, minor mistakes or inefficiencies could occur as people adjust (a risk to performance if not mitigated by clear communication and training blitz).
- **Coverage during transition:** During the merging process, while people are in meetings and training on new things, one must ensure emergency coverage does not drop. There is a risk if a lot of attention goes to planning, that volunteer turnout to calls might dip or things slip through cracks. The leadership will have to double down to keep service normal during that upheaval.
- **Volunteer administration logistics:** Logistical, you will have to merge membership lists, ensuring all volunteers meet the medical and background standards of the new department (which might require updated physicals or clearances), and synchronize volunteer incentive programs. There could be bumps, like volunteers being upset, if a new requirement is imposed (e.g., mandatory training hours per year that one company did not strictly enforce before).

The logistical challenge is that three sets of everything are being combined into one entity, and that takes meticulous planning and execution. The risk is if any piece of the consolidation is overlooked, it could hamper operations or member satisfaction. However, these are manageable with detailed transition planning. Other consolidations have navigated these, but there are many moving parts that the implementation plan must account for.

Public Perception and Community Concerns

The residents of each community might have concerns or misconceptions about what regionalization means for them. Typical community fears include: “Will closing or merging companies mean slower response to my house?”, “Will firefighters still be local people who know the area?”, “Is this a step towards a paid fire department and thus higher taxes?”, or simply emotional attachment such as “Our town’s fire company has been here 100 years; we do not want to lose that identity.” Public perception can be influenced by rumors or incomplete information. If, for instance, word gets out “they’re merging and might close the North Wales firehouse,” even if not true, that could provoke public opposition and pressure on local officials to back out.

In the consolidation of six companies in Bensalem, extensive communication and reassurance was required to gain volunteer and public support. Volunteers there voted overwhelmingly for it (156-6), which suggests leadership did an excellent job addressing concerns. That type of buy-in should be replicated.

The broader issue of change aversion will exist. People are naturally cautious about changes to public safety. They might recall times when consolidation in other services did not go well or just be proud of “their” fire company tradition and not want it homogenized. Fire companies are often cherished community institutions (especially volunteer ones), and anything perceived as altering that (like a new name or losing the familiar local fire chief figure) can cause emotional backlash.

Another community concern is volunteer availability. Ironically, people may think consolidation means fewer firefighters. They might need reassurance that regionalization is about strengthening volunteer response.

Another concern may be that if any municipality has a volunteer relief association with community fundraising events (like an annual carnival or Santa parade), the public might worry about those things going away. These are local cultural events beloved by residents. Ensuring these traditions can continue (under the regional department’s auspices, still at each station) is important to public goodwill.

Finally, consider that if something goes wrong early on (like a high-profile fire with a hiccup in response after consolidation), critics will pounce and say, “See, it was better before.” That risk may require handling initial operations flawlessly and managing expectations that growing pains are normal.

Legal and Contractual Considerations

Legally merging entities involves a host of contractual and statutory considerations:

- **Company Charters and Non-Profit Status:** Each volunteer company probably has its own corporate bylaws and 501(c)(3) status. Merging might require dissolving two and amending one or dissolving all to form a new corporation. That means legal paperwork and ensuring compliance with state non-profit laws. The membership of each corporation requires votes by a certain majority to approve such actions. If any company’s membership votes no, it could derail or at least complicate the consolidation plan. Legally you cannot force a private non-profit to dissolve without its consent.
- **Labor laws and volunteers:** If any paid employees are involved (e.g., UGTFD’s Fire Marshal is a township employee, also maybe part-time administrative assistants), those employees’ status
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must be sorted. Questions such as “Will they be transferred to a new authority, and if so, do they retain benefits/seniority?”, will be posed. If they become employees of the new entity, municipal leaders must ensure compliance with labor laws and possibly collective bargaining if one or more roles become unionized.

- **Intergovernmental agreements (IGAs):** The backbone of this consolidation will be a contract between the municipalities. Drafting this is complex. It must cover governance, funding, asset ownership, dispute resolution, duration, and withdrawal conditions. If not well-drafted, ambiguities could lead to legal disputes down the line. For example, if one town does not pay its share on time, what is the recourse? If one wants out, how do they manage the assets they contributed? These all must be legally clear to avoid court fights or collapse of the arrangement.
- **Union and labor rights:** If in the future the regional department employs career firefighters (not currently planned, but if volunteers keep declining, it is possible same day-time paid crews might be considered), that could introduce labor union issues that were not present in an all-volunteer setup. Even now, volunteer departments are subject to certain labor regulations (like OSHA for safety.) The consolidation plan should foresee any needed steps to remain compliant with regulations (e.g., the new entity must abide by the Pennsylvania Municipalities Authorities Act if it is an authority, or Sunshine Act for board meetings if it is public).
- **Asset and debt assumption:** If one company has outstanding debts (loans on a fire truck) or leases, the new department needs to legally assume them or pay them off. That requires lender approvals. There might also be grants that had existing conditions. For instance, a FEMA grant might say equipment must stay with the grantee for x number of years. If transferred to a new dept, municipal leaders need to ensure it does not violate grant terms.
- **Insurance and liability:** The new department must secure comprehensive liability and property insurance from day one. Meanwhile, the old companies will eventually cancel theirs. Gap coverage is crucial. Additionally, worker’s comp for volunteers (in PA, municipalities cover volunteers with worker’s comp) needs to be sorted. Questions such as “Does each municipality cover their volunteers now?” will need to be examined. Under one department, one policy covers all volunteers. The arrangement must ensure that every firefighter is covered when responding anywhere in the region.
- **Fire Relief Associations:** Pennsylvania’s volunteer firefighters relief associations are separate legal entities that manage state aid funds. Each fire company had its own relief association. Consolidation may imply merging these or designating one as the primary. This requires state coordination and merging non-profit relief associations (which hold assets like relief funds and equipment bought with relief money). The Auditor General’s office needs to approve a plan to consolidate relief associations.
- **Mutual Aid Contracts:** The new department will need to sign new mutual aid agreements with surrounding communities (or join existing ones). The previous ones naming individual companies will be void or need updating.

Given all the above, while none of these legal issues are insurmountable, they are numerous and require careful planning and legal counsel. The risk is if any are managed improperly, it could lead to

legal challenges or operational problems. If the intermunicipal agreement is weak, a future political shift could unravel it (one town pulling out abruptly).

In summary, the consolidation must be built on a rock-solid legal foundation to endure. It is crucial to engage municipal solicitors and specialized attorneys in fire service mergers to address these challenges. These challenges, though daunting, are common in consolidations. Knowing them upfront is the first step to mitigating them. Challenges can be overcome with inclusive planning, open communication, fair agreements, and phasing the changes. For instance, tackling cultural issues by preserving station identities (like maintaining station names or insignia on trucks as a nod to history, while adopting a new department name on paperwork) can ease the transition. The forthcoming recommendations will propose strategies to address each of these risks, such as governance structures, change management plans, and community outreach efforts to minimize the downsides of consolidation.

Recommendations for Consolidation (if applicable)

After a thorough analysis of the current state, benefits, and challenges, this section outlines a recommended roadmap for consolidation. These recommendations assume that regionalization is feasible and desirable by the stakeholders (as the analysis suggests). The approach is phased and strategic and designed to maximize benefits while mitigating risks. Key aspects include the consolidation model, implementation timeline, governance, financial arrangements, personnel integration strategies, operational standardization, communication plans, and metrics for success.

Proposed Consolidation Model

The recommended model is to form a Regional Fire Department that serves all four municipalities, structured as a single organization with multiple stations. Legally, the preferred approach is an Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) creating either a Fire District via a Council of Governments or a Joint Municipal Authority specifically for fire services. Given Pennsylvania law, a practical route is to establish a Regional Fire Commission through an inter-municipal agreement under Act 180 (Department of Community & Economic Development guidelines). This Regional Fire Commission would function as the governing board of the consolidated department.

- **Governance:** The commission should have representation from each municipality to ensure equity. For instance, a five (5)-member commission with one appointee each from Upper Gwynedd, Lower Gwynedd, Ambler, and North Wales, plus perhaps a fifth independent or rotating member (or two from UG to reflect population, making 6 total). Voting can be structured so that no one municipality can override others unilaterally. A supermajority vote might be required for major decisions (like budget approval, chief appointment). This structure follows the principle that support from local government aids consolidation success while giving each community a voice.
- **Organizational Structure:** The regional fire department would be led by a single Fire Chief (career or volunteer as determined, but a full-time position even if currently filled by a volunteer chief, given the expanded scope). Under the Fire Chief, there would be uniform ranks including Deputy Chiefs for operations and training, Captains or Station Commanders for each station,

and Lieutenants for various units. All current volunteer members become members of the Regional FD and assigned to one of the four stations (and can be re-assigned or respond across stations as needed). One department with four operating platoons/locations would exist. Each existing station retains a number or name (for tradition, one could keep calling them “Station 7 (Ambler), Station 7B (Penllyn), Station 62 (North Wales), Station 80 (Upper Gwynedd)” under the umbrella of “North Montgomery Fire Department” for example, a hypothetical name).

- **Identity and Name:** Choose a neutral, inclusive name that reflects regional unity. For example, “North Penn Area Fire-Rescue” or “Montgomery Highlands Fire Department.” A name that does not single out one town will help foster unity. Many successful consolidations created a new name (e.g., Bensalem Volunteer Fire Rescue). Alongside the new name, station nicknames or heritage insignia will be maintained in a secondary way (each station can have a small display of their old company logo in the station or on apparatus). This respects history while moving forward.
- **Volunteer Company Corporations:** Plan for the volunteer companies (Wissahickon, North Penn, Upper Gwynedd) to either dissolve and merge into a single nonprofit that supports the regional department (like a membership or fundraising auxiliary) or convert into station “social clubs” under the new department. The recommended route is to create one new 501(c)(3) entity, e.g., Regional Fire & Rescue Association, and have the old ones legally transfer assets to it and then dissolve. This new entity works in tandem with the municipal Fire Commission. This approach simplifies fundraising and relief association integration. Each station can have a committee or “company” under the umbrella for local station matters, but legally one entity to oversee donations and grants is cleaner.

This model (inter-municipal governance and unified department) has been successful in multiple PA contexts to balance local control with regional efficiency. It is a full merger operationally and financially, supported by a joint authority.

Phased Implementation Plan with Timelines

A careful, phased approach will reduce disruption. The following phases are proposed over 24-30 months:

Phase 1: Planning and Agreement (Months 0-6)

- Develop a Regional Fire Services Task Force with representatives (municipal managers, fire chiefs, volunteer reps, and public members) from each community to steer the process. This task force will finalize the consolidation plan details.
- Draft the Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) and new governance bylaws. Seek legal counsel to ensure all municipal codes and state laws are satisfied. The goal is to have a draft IGA by month three, review and revise by month five.
- Concurrently, conduct a financial analysis to settle on cost-sharing formulas and budget for the regional department’s first year. Use recent budgets of each company and municipality to project needs.

- By month six, have each municipal governing body vote on the IGA and commit to the consolidation (allow more time if public hearings are required). The goal is a signed agreement (or ordinances) establishing the Regional Fire Commission.

Phase 2: Formation and Integration (Months 6-18)

- Once the agreement is signed, officially form the Regional Fire Commission. They meet and appoint a fire chief for the new department (choosing from existing chiefs or having a selection process). Presume this happens around month 7-8.
- Initiate organizational integration:
 - Merge administrative functions: create unified record systems, have the new commission take over insurance policies and worker's compensation by a target date.
 - The Fire Chief, with input from former chiefs (now likely Deputy Chiefs or Advisors), drafts the new Standard Operating Guidelines (SOGs) and policies by ~month 12. Use best practices from each and NFPA standards to guide this. Circulate drafts to volunteers for feedback to gain buy-in.
 - Begin cross-training: organize joint drills that include all stations to start building team cohesion. Emphasize common procedures from the new SOGs once finalized.
 - Inventory and standardize the equipment: by month (12) twelve, decide on standard hose threads, equipment brands to adopt. Budget for any adapters or replacements needed and implement by month (15) fifteen. For example, if incompatible coupling, purchase adapters immediately so interoperability is present from Day 1 of merged operations.
- Legal merging of entities: Aim to consolidate relief associations and volunteer company assets by end of the first year. This might mean holding votes in each volunteer company around the 9th or 10th month to approve asset transfer to the new department or authority. Collaborate closely with the PA Auditor General's office on relief association merger by month (12) twelve.
- Communications and dispatch: Coordinate with Montgomery County 9-1-1 to program the new department (assign it a unique Department ID). Evaluate new dispatch protocols in parallel with old ones (perhaps have a "soft launch" where you internally handle calls as one department while 911 still tones old structure as backup). Go live with single-tone dispatch on a chosen date (could be start of a new year or July 1 of a year).
- Throughout Phase 2, implement a change management strategy: hold town hall meetings with volunteers and separate ones with the public at each major milestone. Provide updates, address concerns (for volunteers, e.g., discuss uniform changes, new rank assignments. For the public, reassure service will remain local and improve).

Phase 3: Full Implementation (Month 18-24)

- Set a "Go-Live Day" for the Regional Fire Department operations. For example, the start of the fiscal year after planning (if planning in 2025, go-live Jan 1, 2027). On this day, all calls are dispatched under the new department name, personnel wear new identifiers, etc.
- Leading up to that, do a trial period (months 15-17) where many aspects are already functioning regionally. You might conduct internal dispatch drills or even respond to some calls jointly as training. This will help to work out any issues.
- Launch a public communication campaign about one month before go-live: press releases, social media, community meetings informing that "On [Date], the new North Penn Regional Fire *Ambler Borough, North Wales Borough, Upper Gwynedd Township, Lower Gwynedd Township* Regional Fire Study | 67

Dept begins service. You will still see your local fire stations and firefighters, but now with enhanced coordination.” Emphasize improved service, same local presence.

- Ensure all signage, apparatus decals, uniforms are updated by go-live (One strategy: apply magnetic or temporary decals with new name on apparatus for an interim, and if heritage is important, incorporate old company number into new graphics, e.g., “Station 7, North Penn Regional Fire Dept” on the trucks, at least during the transition).
- Monitor initial performance: In the first 3-6 months of operation, track response times, turnout, any issues arising. Have the Fire Chief report to the commission monthly and troubleshoot any issues. Possibly keep the Task Force as an advisory group through this period to adjust things quickly if needed.

Phase 4: Stabilization and Continuous Improvement (Month 24+)

- By two years in, evaluate the consolidation against key performance indicators (detailed later). Use that evaluation to tweak any governance or operational items.
- Continue efforts to unify culture: establish a combined firefighters’ association or social committee to plan events (e.g., a yearly regional fire department banquet, rather than separate banquets, building camaraderie).
- Look ahead at more efficient measures: consider if station infrastructure can be optimized (no immediate closures but maybe plan long-term capital improvements like a training facility or combined maintenance shop).
- At this stage, the new department should be running smoothly, and the focus shifts to fine-tuning and maximizing benefits (like aggressive recruitment now that structure is in place or seeking accreditation or improved ISO rating).

Throughout all phases, maintain an empathetic and inclusive approach by regularly soliciting input from volunteers at all ranks (via surveys or a consolidation suggestion box) and ensuring no group feels steamrolled. A phased approach with clear timelines and milestones, as outlined, helps manage change in digestible increments and builds confidence as early successes accumulate (for example, by Phase 3, volunteers will have trained together and seen improvements, easing acceptance of the final merger).

Recommended Governance Structure and Leadership Model

As noted above, governance will be through a Regional Fire Commission or Board created by the municipalities. To elaborate:

- The Commission should ideally be comprised of a mix of municipal officials (to ensure accountability and budget control) and a citizen/fire service representative (to incorporate operational perspective). One model includes four municipal managers (or elected officials) and two fire service representatives (experienced volunteers from the new department, one officer and one rank-and-file elected by their peers), making a six-member board. The chair could rotate annually among the municipalities to reinforce equality.
- The Commission’s responsibilities are to set policy, approve budgets, hire/fire the Fire Chief, and ensure the intermunicipal agreement is upheld. They would meet quarterly or monthly initially.

- The Fire Chief is the chief executive of the fire department, reporting to the Commission. Given the scope of managing 4 stations and ~100 volunteers, this role needs to be full-time. If an adequately qualified individual among current volunteers can fill it on at least a partially full-time basis (with a stipend or if one of the townships transitions their Fire Marshal into that role), that is good. Otherwise, recruiting a full-time paid Chief might be necessary. The key is strong leadership with consolidation experience, if possible, to navigate the transition and unify personnel.
- Second in command: a Deputy Chief of Operations overseeing daily response readiness across all stations, and a Deputy Chief of Administration (or these could be volunteer assistant chiefs if they have capacity, but clarity in roles is needed) will be established.
- Each station can have a Captain or Station Commander responsible for facility and local community liaison, under the central leadership.
- Leadership model should incorporate a Joint Leadership Council of former fire company leaders during transition (e.g., the existing chiefs and presidents form a council advising the new Chief for the first year). This taps into their knowledge and helps them feel included rather than simply sidelined. Over time, that council can begin to phase out once roles are fully integrated.
- It is recommended to codify certain protections in the governance structure (e.g., require that the Fire Chief position, if vacated, is filled by someone with significant experience in the department or region to prevent external political hires lacking local understanding), and require Commission decisions on critical issues (like closing a station or reassigning major assets) to be unanimous or require the consent of the municipality impacted. This alleviates fears of one area being shortchanged by majority vote.
- In terms of legal structure, the Commission could either operate as an extension of the municipalities (with one of them acting as fiduciary agent for finances) or as an independent authority with its own ability to enter contracts. The latter is more autonomous but requires more setup. Most regional EMS or fire services in PA stick with an intermunicipal committee model to avoid creating a whole new authority, because it is simpler to manage day-to-day through one municipality's administrative systems.
- Regardless, governance must ensure transparency and accountability. All municipalities should receive regular reports. Perhaps include in the IGA that the Fire Chief presents an annual "State of Fire Services" to each municipal council/supervisors meeting to keep local officials and the public informed and engaged.

The leadership model of one unified command might be jarring for volunteers used to their own chief. It must be emphasized that everyone can advance and hold leadership roles, just within a bigger organizational chart. The recommended approach is to assign interim ranks that honor current positions (e.g., current chiefs become Deputy Chiefs or Assistant Chiefs assigned to divisions or stations), so nobody is immediately demoted or left out. Over time, through natural attrition and a structured promotion process, the leadership can streamline. Initially, a "unified command team" comprising leaders from each legacy department under the new Fire Chief is established and fosters inclusion. For example, two Assistant Chiefs are appointed -- one focusing on Ambler/LG operations (ex-WFC chief) and one on UG/NW operations (ex-UGTFD or NPVFC chief) reporting to the new Fire Chief. This tandem can reassure all volunteers that their former chief is still advocating for their area while everyone adjusts to the new regime.

In summary, the governance and leadership must blend equal municipal oversight with effective fireground leadership. This model strives for that by giving each municipality a seat at the table,

instituting a capable Fire Chief and team drawn from existing leadership, and making sure decision power is balanced and not dominated solely by population size or budget contribution (to maintain trust among towns).

Financial Model for a Consolidated Department

The financial plan should detail how the new department will be funded, how costs are shared, and how budgeting will work going forward. Key recommendations:

- **Cost-Sharing Formula:** After evaluating options, a hybrid formula is recommended to balance equity and simplicity. For instance:
 - Fifty percent of the regional fire budget allocated by each municipality's proportion of total population (this addresses service demand by population served).
 - Twenty-five percent allocated by assessed property value (to reflect ability to pay and risk exposure in terms of property protected).
 - Twenty-five percent is allocated by 3-year average call volume per municipality (to account for actual usage of services).

This combination ensures that no single factor skews the contributions completely. Weights can be adjusted if needed (e.g., 40/30/30). Using the communities:

- Upper Gwynedd (~17k people, high property value, moderate calls),
- Lower Gwynedd (~12k people, high value, moderate calls),
- Ambler (~6.8k, lower value per capita, high calls),
- North Wales (~3.4k, moderate value, low calls).

This formula would have Upper G. pay the largest share, Lower G. second, Ambler third, N. Wales smallest, roughly commensurate with their size and risk. Run exact numbers to confirm fairness. Importantly, to avoid shocks, if any municipality's new share is much higher than its current spending, consider a phase-in period (e.g., increase their contribution over 3 years to full formula amount, with others correspondingly adjusting so the total budget is still met). This phasing can ease budget impacts and political acceptance.

- **Unified Budget:** The Fire Commission will produce an annual unified budget for the department. It should be approved by the Commission and then ratified or acknowledged by each municipal governing body as part of their budget process. Ideally, the IGA can stipulate that once the formula is set, each town is obligated to fund at that level, to prevent renegotiation fights each year. Only if the formula or major budget expansion is proposed would it require returning to each council for approval. Routine increases (e.g., 2-3% annual for inflation) could be automatic.
- **Revenue Streams:** The consolidated budget will include:
 - Municipal contributions (per formula).
 - State Fire Relief funds: these will come as one combined check to the new department's relief association and be earmarked for eligible expenses (gear, insurance, etc.).
 - Fundraising/donations: the new department should absolutely continue fundraising campaigns. A recommendation is to run one unified annual fund drive letter, but
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- segmented by community, so residents get a letter signed by their local station captain on behalf of the regional department. Funds all go to the regional Fire Company fund, but tracking donations by zip code might help ensure focus on each area's support. These funds can either offset municipal contributions or be allocated for extras (the Commission should decide policy on whether fundraising reduces what towns pay or is supplementary. Usually, it is supplementary to allow enhancements).
- Grants: Pursued as one entity, the department might attract more and bigger grants. The Fire Chief or a designated grant coordinator should aggressively seek federal, state, and private grants for things like apparatus, equipment, and training.
 - Possibly service agreements: For example, Merck might provide an annual donation or contract for specialized readiness. Also, consider revenue from standby fees or special services if applicable.
 - The department could also do cost recovery for certain incidents (like billing for hazardous material cleanup to responsible parties' insurance), though that should be done carefully to not alienate residents.
- **Capital Fund:** It is wise to establish a Capital Reserve Fund within the new department budget for apparatus and facility needs. Each year, allocate a portion of funds (including possibly a substantial chunk of fundraising or a dedicated capital contribution from municipalities) to this reserve. The Commission should adopt a 10-year capital improvement plan early on (perhaps within the first year) that schedules apparatus replacements and any station renovations. Then, contributions can be smoothed over years rather than spiking when a big purchase hits. For example, if a ladder replacement is due in 5 years for ~\$1.5M, start saving \$300k/year regionally so that it is funded with little debt. This approach alleviates municipal fear of sudden large outlays.
 - **Equalization of Volunteer Incentives:** From a financial perspective, ensure all volunteers across the region have equal access to stipends, tax rebates, LOSAP, or any incentive. If North Wales currently offers a small property tax rebate for volunteers (Montgomery County has authorized such a program), make sure all municipalities implement it uniformly, so no volunteer is at a disadvantage. The cost of those incentives (though relatively minor in budgets) might be taken on by each town for their resident volunteers or could be pooled and paid for by the department.
 - **Handling Existing Debts/Assets:** If one company has an outstanding loan on a truck, collectively decide to either pay it off (possibly using a combination of municipal funds) or have the new department take over and each town's contribution indirectly covers it. The key is transparency. List all assets and liabilities each party brings and incorporate into the financial plan. Negotiating those specifics equitably is part of initial financial planning.
 - **Financial Control and Audit:** The Commission should designate a treasurer (maybe one of the municipal finance directors or a hired accountant) to handle funds. All spending should follow public sector standards for procurement (since taxpayer money is involved) such as competitive bidding above certain thresholds, etc. Annual independent audits are recommended and likely required by the IGA or by law if it is an authority. This ensures fiscal accountability and builds trust among the municipalities that funds are handled correctly.

- **Taxation considerations:** A new separate fire tax is not recommended initially. Rather, each municipality continues its own revenue as it currently does (general fund or existing fire millage) to meet its obligation. Long-term, if the service proves its value, municipalities might coordinate each to enact a small fire tax so that funding is more predictable and dedicated. However, in the short term, keep it within existing frameworks to reduce the complexity for taxpayers.

The overall financial model should be spelled out in the IGA to avoid future disputes. Perhaps include a clause that the funding formula is reviewed every five years or if census changes significantly, to adjust for demographic shifts. Also, have a clear method for budget dispute resolution: If the Commission proposes a budget and one town objects due to cost, how do we mediate? Possibly allow a modest arbitration process or default to a minimal growth scenario if there is no agreement.

By implementing this model, each municipality pays a fair share, and the fire department has a stable budget to operate and improve. Over time, cost savings from joint purchasing and reduced duplication (as mentioned in benefits) can be quantified and potentially returned to municipalities or re-invested in service (for example, if insurance costs drop by \$X due to consolidation, that frees up \$X for better equipment without asking for more money). The Commission should track such efficiencies and communicate them to stakeholders.

Strategies for Personnel Integration and Cultural Alignment

To successfully merge the human element, deliberate strategies are needed to address volunteer concerns, maintain morale, and build a unified culture:

Involve Personnel in the Process: From the outset, involve volunteers in shaping the new department. For example, create working groups of firefighters from each legacy company to work on key topics. This might include one group for apparatus placement, one for SOP

harmonization, and one for training plans. This inclusion gives members ownership of the outcome, rather than feeling changes are imposed top-down. It echoes a lesson that consolidations require change and cooperation and are more likely to succeed when members have input. When volunteers see their ideas considered (and often implemented) in the new system, they are more likely to embrace it.

Respect Traditions and Identities: While a new identity is formed, find ways to honor the history of each company. This could include:

- Preserving historical artifacts (trophies, old photos, memorials) at each station.
- Allowing station patches or nicknames to continue informally (e.g., station crew shirts might still say “Wissahickon Fire Co. Station 7” on a sleeve alongside the new dept logo).
- Conducting a “last call” ceremony for each old department when the time comes (radio dispatch gives a final call honoring their years of service, then welcomes the new department). These symbolic gestures help with closure and pride.
- Naming the new department’s divisions or even apparatus to reflect the heritage (like naming the heavy rescue unit “Rescue 7” to nod to WFC’s rescue origins, etc., keeping familiar call signs to some degree can ease transition as well).

Fair and Transparent Leadership Appointments: As earlier noted, designate interim roles that give all current leaders a meaningful position. If one of the three current chiefs is chosen as overall Chief, make the other Chiefs, Deputies or Station Chiefs. If an outside/new chief is brought in (less likely, but if so), ensure the existing chiefs are given high-ranking roles and their experience is valued. Create a formal promotional pathway for the future (e.g., criteria for becoming a lieutenant or captain in the new department should be set up and communicated so everyone knows how to advance). Maybe even freeze promotions for the first six months until everyone gets acclimated, then open opportunities fairly. Additionally, integrate membership and perhaps create a new rank insignia and uniform for the regional fire department. Hold a ceremony to issue these to volunteers. This can be a team-building milestone. Everyone trades in old badges for new ones together.

Unified Training and Team building: Conduct multi-station training exercises early and often. Mixed crews should drill side by side on engine companies, truck operations, etc. Also run team-building workshops or social events such as a regional fire department picnic or family day. This can get families and members of different stations mingling in a non-emergency setting. Consider running an internal “Firefighter Olympics” or skills competition mixing teams from different former companies. The more personal relationships are built across the old boundaries, the more the “us vs them” dissolves. Many volunteers will realize they share the same dedication and can enjoy working together.

Communication and Change Management: Use regular communication channels such as a monthly consolidation newsletter (by email or bulletin) updating all members on progress, decisions made, timelines. This prevents misinformation. Hold Q&A sessions where volunteers can ask the Fire Chief or Commission members about any aspect of the transition. Also, allow venting as some members may be frustrated. Have officers listen to their concerns patiently and address them empathetically. Not everyone will be 100% happy, but feeling heard goes a long way.

Align Policies and Benefits: As recommended, make sure any volunteer benefits (length of service awards, stipends, reimbursements, health screenings, etc.) are uniformly provided. If one company had a great junior firefighter program, adopt it department-wide. If another had a scholarship fund for members, consider expanding it. Conversely, if one had stricter requirements, phase those in gradually rather than all at once, if possible, to allow adjustment.

Address Egos and Fears Directly: It might be wise to engage a professional facilitator or use internal respected figures to have a candid dialogue about culture. Sometimes a workshop on “building our new department culture” could be held, where members collectively discuss values and mission. This could produce a new mission statement and core values for the regional FD that everyone contributes to. Publishing and reinforcing those values (e.g., “Teamwork, Service, Tradition, Progress” etc.) can unify the philosophy. Acknowledge the loss people feel but focus on what is gained; emphasize that consolidation is not a takeover but a merging of strengths. Perhaps adopt a motto like “Stronger Together for Our Communities” to constantly remind why this is being done.

Personnel Support: Be mindful that volunteers often volunteer not just out of altruism but social fulfillment. Ensure that the social aspects (banquets, camaraderie at stations) remain. Each station should keep its identity as a community hub. The regional department should support station level. No beloved public tradition should be lost. If anything, share them by having an all-station holiday parade convoy through all towns. This helps firefighters feel they did not “sell out” their community relationships.

Fire Police and Auxiliary integration: Do not forget to integrate and utilize fire police and auxiliary members. Engage them in the planning too. Possibly unify fire police under one command in the new department but keep them assigned to stations. Make sure they get new identification and training, and that they feel part of the new team, not an afterthought. Same with any Ladies' Auxiliary or fund-raising clubs. If they exist, work with them on how they operate going forward (as station support committees).

Plan for Conflict Resolution: Inevitably, there may be personal conflicts or station rivalries that might flare up during the transition. The Fire Chief and Commission should have a conflict resolution plan. Consider assigning a neutral officer or HR consultant to mediate if needed. Quickly addressing grievances will prevent morale from souring. Also implement an anonymous feedback channel (like a suggestion box or online form) where members can voice concerns about how things are going, which leadership can then address or clarify.

Gradual Uniform Transition: Possibly allow a transition period where both old and new identifiers are worn (like dual patches on gear) to ease into it. Then after a year, fully switch to new uniforms/gear. The timeline should be clear to all. Also, financing new gear pieces (like new badges, patches) should occur and will ensure that volunteers are not paying out-of-pocket for the change.

Celebrate Wins as One Team: As soon as the consolidated department responds successfully to a notable incident, celebrate it as a team achievement. Highlight how Station A and Station B worked seamlessly. This reinforces the payoff of working together. Similarly, if one station does something excellent (like winning an award or getting a big grant), publicize it department-wide to instill shared pride.

In summary, the strategy is to be inclusive, communicative, respectful of heritage, but also resolute in forging a single team identity. Given that rivalries and loss of identity are a top cause of consolidation failures, lean heavily on honoring each group's contributions and making them partners in creating the new entity. Also consider utilizing external resources like consultants who specialize in volunteer consolidations to run integration workshops, as they have seen these cultural issues before and can guide leadership in best practices.

Recommendations for Standardized Operations, Training, and Equipment

Building on the earlier discussion of standardization benefits, here are concrete recommendations to standardize operations:

Operations/SOP:

- Develop a single Standard Operating Guidelines (SOG) manual for the regional department. Start with Montgomery County model procedures or NFPA 1720 guidance, then incorporate specific best practices from each existing company. Ensure topics like incident command structure, radio communication protocols, personal protective equipment usage, Mayday procedures, are covered. Vet the draft through a committee of experienced members from all three companies to get buy-in and capture input.
- Once approved, conduct mandatory training sessions on the new SOGs for all members. Ideally hands-on or scenario-based training (not just handing out a manual) so everyone can practice under the new protocols.

- Implement unified dispatch protocols: work with Montgomery County 9-1-1 to ensure call typing and run assignments are updated. If possible, get all stations on common dispatch tones or channels for multi-station calls. Standardize terminology.
- Response plans: Reconfigure automatic response plans so that for any given incident type and location, the appropriate station units are dispatched from within the department and from mutual aid. This means creating internal alarm assignments that are geography-based, not municipality-based. Use GIS to map out initial response districts for each station, overlapping appropriately. Simultaneously update mutual aid agreements to reflect the new department as a single agency covering all four areas.
- Standardize on-scene practices which includes things like how incident command is designated (“Command 80” becomes “Regional Fire Command” or similar) and how unit numbering will work (keep existing station numbers for familiarity but prefix them with new department name). All personnel must know, for example, that “Engine 7” now refers to the engine at Ambler station but under the new department. Alternatively, re-number all apparatus in a logical system (like 81, 82, 83, 84 for the four stations, each apparatus numbered after station). Most combined fire departments choose to maintain station numbers initially to avoid confusion.

Training:

- **Establish a Regional Training Program headed by a Training Officer (could be a volunteer with that duty or eventually a part-time paid training coordinator if needed):** This program should schedule regular multi-station drills (e.g., one large-scale drill per quarter involving all four stations, and monthly smaller drills where two stations team up).
- **Unify training standards:** Set baseline certification requirements (e.g., all interior firefighters must achieve Firefighter I within one year of joining and strongly encourage Firefighter II thereafter). Officers must have Fire Officer I (for Lieutenants/Captains) and Fire Officer II for Chief Officers, plus Incident Safety Officer training. The criteria can be grandfathered for current officers with a grace period to obtain them (to respect current roles but raise everyone to standard).
- **Crosstrain members in each other’s specialties:** have WFC’s rescue experts teach a vehicle rescue class to North Wales and Upper Gwynedd members. Have UG’s team give a hazmat awareness refresher to other members. Have NPVFC’s QRS leaders teach patient care basics to WFC members. This spreads critical skills so each station can manage a bit of everything when needed, while still maintaining specialized teams for the most complex tasks.
- **Training Facilities:** Pursue the possibility of a joint training site or use the County Fire Academy more frequently as one unit. Perhaps arrange a regular night at the academy’s burn building just for your department drills.
- **Documentation:** Implement one training record system (you could use software like Target Solutions or whatever Montgomery County provides) so that all personnel training is logged uniformly. This helps in tracking who needs what recertification or who is eligible for promotion.

- **Mutual Aid Training:** Invite neighboring departments to your drills and participate in theirs. This is more to ensure that now with a new department, external mutual aid knows your capabilities. Possibly host a multi-department drill post-consolidation to demonstrate the new department's unified operations to neighboring companies so they gain confidence in working with you.

Equipment:

- **Inventory all major equipment from each company:** Decide on standard brands/models for critical items: SCBA (likely all are already Scott or MSA depending but unify if not), radios (program all with same channel sets), hose thread (Montgomery County is likely standard national hose thread, but confirm if any differ like 5" LDH couplings, get Storz for all if some lack, etc.), and medical kits (standardize QRS bag layout so any firefighter can assist at a medical scene using another station's kit).
- **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):** If gear varies widely in age/quality, create a plan to ensure all firefighters have comparable, up-to-date turnout gear and uniforms. This could be through a bulk purchase using consolidation as justification (example, a grant to outfit everyone in the same PPE ensemble). At minimum, standardize what color helmets each rank uses; to avoid confusion (some companies use black for FF, yellow for officers).
- **Apparatus equipment:** Standardize what tools are carried on each type of apparatus. For example, decide that every engine in the department will carry a set of irons, 24ft ladder, 1000' of 5" hose, and foam system. If one engine is lacking something that others have, acquire it so they are all similarly capable. Similarly, equip each with standardized medical equipment if they all run QRS. For specialized units (like heavy rescue or ladder), ensure their equipment is complementary, not redundant, unless needed. For example, maybe both Ladder and Rescue carry certain stabilization tools, but one carries extra cutting gear, in a planned way.
- **Marking and numbering equipment:** After merging, re-label equipment with new department name or asset numbers. Implement a central asset management system.
- **Apparatus deployment adjustments:** Re-distribute specialized apparatus for optimal coverage:
 - Keep Ladder (or Quint, or both aerials) in separate ends (likely Ladder stays in Ambler, Quint stays in Upper Gwynedd).
 - The heavy rescue (Rescue 7) could remain in Ambler or be moved (e.g., to Penllyn station) if response times to highways or industrial areas would improve. Alternatively, if Squad 80 and Rescue 7 overlap, consider one as the primary rescue and the other as backup or designated as second due rescue or engine depending on call.
 - Ensure North Wales has at least one modern engine.
 - Consider locating one spare engine strategically so it can cover if any front-line apparatus goes down for maintenance.
- **Maintenance:** Unify apparatus maintenance under one program. Select one mechanic or service vendor to manage all preventive maintenance and schedule annual services together. Do the same for SCBA flow testing and ladder testing. This produces consistency and possibly discounts.

- **Uniform appearance:** Eventually (by full implementation), all apparatus should bear the new department name/insignia alongside station identifier. All firefighter's turnout coats should have the new department name on the back (could issue patches to cover old names). Achieve this through attrition or sooner by moderate expense for patches/decals.

Standardizing operations and equipment will be an ongoing process, but targeting major areas as above within the first year of consolidation will smooth joint working. The Training Officer and apparatus committee should continuously evaluate if procedures or gear need tweaks. For example, if a new piece of technology is implemented, roll it out department-wide with training, rather than piecemeal.

By year two or three, aim for the department to be functioning under completely unified SOPs with interchangeable crews and apparatus; meaning you could assign firefighters from any station to any other station for a shift, and they would operate effectively because everything is standardized. Achieving standardization is a hallmark of a truly consolidated operation.

Comprehensive Communication and Public Engagement Strategy

Public support is crucial for smooth consolidation. Therefore, a proactive communication strategy should be employed:

Announcement and Framing: As soon as the municipalities reach a preliminary agreement in principle (even before final votes), jointly announce the intent to explore/regionalize fire services. Do this through a press release and a joint town hall meeting. Frame it positively and emphasize that this is about improving fire protection and being good stewards of resources. Use data points from the study to reassure, e.g., “our volunteers already work together on many calls, this will formalize and strengthen that teamwork, ensuring quicker responses and more firefighters on scene.”

Public Meetings: Hold at least one community meeting in each municipality (or combined if turnout expected to be modest) where officials and fire chiefs explain the plan and answer questions. Perhaps have a brief presentation including:

- Why consolidation (volunteer shortages, need for efficiency).
- What will change and what will not change (e.g., “You will still dial 911 the same way, the same fire stations will respond from your neighborhood, but now with more coordination and backup.”).
- Use visuals such as maps showing station coverage improving, a projected unified fleet photo, or new department patch design to make it tangible.
- Address common concerns directly: response times, station closures (explicitly, “No stations will close under this plan” if that is true), cost (show that combined spending is not skyrocketing), volunteer involvement (mention volunteers have been involved in planning and support it, maybe even have a respected volunteer speak to say they believe it is best for service).

Updates and Transparency: Create a section on one of the municipal or a new shared website for the “Regional Fire Service Initiative.” Post regular updates, FAQs, draft agreements (to show transparency), timeline, and contact information for people to ask questions. Also, use social media (Facebook pages of each fire company/municipality) to share positive messages and progress. For

example, when the new department name/logo is chosen, share it publicly with an explanation and invite feedback (if appropriate). When volunteers do joint training, take photos and post “North Wales & Ambler firefighters training together as part of our preparation for the new unified department. “Building a stronger team to serve you better.”

Media Outreach: Engage local newspapers (e.g., Montgomery News) and online outlets (NorthPennNow, Patch) with human interest stories about the merge. Perhaps arrange a ride-along for a reporter once the consolidation is near launch, to illustrate how calls will run. Emphasize stories like “volunteer firefighters from formerly separate companies now respond side by side, improving outcomes.” If any area had an ISO review or event showing need, mention how consolidation addresses it.

Branding and Identity Campaign: Once a new name and logo are approved, organize a PR campaign:

- Unveil the new fire department logo with fanfare (at a community day or fire prevention open house).
- Have an event where the mayors and fire chiefs of all four communities unveil a fire engine with new decals. Possibly invite the community for a “meet the new department” day at a central location with apparatus from all stations on display with new branding.
- Issue a mailer or include in municipal newsletters a section on “Meet Your Regional Fire Department” explaining the new structure and introducing the leadership. Emphasize that these are the same dedicated volunteers from your community, just organized differently.

Reassurance of Local Presence: Highlight that each community will still have its station and local volunteers. Perhaps commit the new fire department to maintain liaison roles (e.g., assigning a station captain to attend Ambler Borough Council meetings regularly to provide updates), so the community feels they still have a direct connection.

Addressing Negative Feedback: There may be criticism (e.g., some residents or even a couple volunteers may not be on board). Develop a plan to respond respectfully. For example, if someone says, “this will slow response,” counter with facts: “Actually, data from Upper Gwynedd shows when they need extra help, combining resources will cut the time it takes to get additional units on scene by X minutes.” If someone says, “I heard they might sell our firehouse,” have officials clearly state no plan to close any firehouse is in this consolidation. Combat misinformation quickly via official statements or Q&A on the FAQ webpage.

Community Benefits Emphasis: Keep telling the public what is in it for them:

- Insurance rate improvements in the future due to a better ISO (mentioning the goal of reaching a better ISO class with unified training and water supply use).
- The fact that the volunteer service is being preserved (implying cost savings vs needing a paid department if volunteers dwindled due to fragmentation).
- More robust service for things like large storms or simultaneous fires is a safety net for them.

Ongoing Public Engagement: Even after launching the regional fire department, maintain outreach:

- Fire prevention programs now under one umbrella can be more consistent and wider reaching. Let people know of any new initiatives like a regional fire safety trailer visiting schools.
- Solicit community input occasionally. One year in, conduct a public survey or feedback session: “How are we doing? Have you noticed any changes? Are you satisfied with the new arrangement?” This shows accountability and willingness to adjust if needed.

Leveraging Community Leaders: Get buy-in from influential community figures (e.g., perhaps a testimonial from a long-time volunteer or a respected former official: “As former Mayor of Ambler, I fully support this consolidation because I believe it will keep our town safer while preserving our volunteer tradition.”). Put such quotes in press releases or on social media.

Utilize Visual Media: Create a short video to share on social media and websites. Show firefighters from each station working together, chiefs explaining the vision, and maybe a message like “4 Communities, 1 Team. United for Your Safety” (just as an example tagline). Videos can engage those who do not read lengthy releases.

Firehouse Open Houses: Host open house events at each station as the new department goes live. Invite residents to come meet the firefighters (many will be the same faces they know, easing worries), see any new equipment, and learn about the changes. This individualized touch can convert skeptics as they see it is still their neighbors serving.

Monitor public chatter: Keep an eye on local social media or letters to editor for any persistent misconceptions and address them publicly. For example, if rumor spreads that volunteers are quitting en masse (which hopefully is not true), put out factual numbers: “Since consolidation planning began, our volunteer count has actually held steady at 100 members, and more are joining training now, no drop-off as rumored.”

A comprehensive communications approach like this ensures that the narrative remains positive and fact-based, rather than letting fear or falsehoods take hold. As consolidation is a major change, treating public outreach as vital helps secure the community’s trust and support, which in turn can bolster political support and volunteer morale (when they see the public backing them).

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for Monitoring Success Post-Consolidation

It is important to define how effectiveness of the consolidated department will be measured over time. Establishing Key Performance Indicators provides a way to objectively monitor if the goals are met and identify areas needing improvement. Recommended KPIs include:

- **Response Time Improvements:** Track average response times to incidents in each municipality before vs. after consolidation. Specifically, measure:
 - Dispatch to on-scene time for first arriving unit (for fires, for EMS QRS calls).
 - Dispatch to full assignment arrival (i.e., time it takes to get, say, (10) ten firefighters and two engines and ladder on scene of a working fire).
 Compare these to baseline figures from previous years. A reduction in times would

- confirm improved efficiency (e.g., “reduced average fire response time from 9 minutes to 7 minutes in Lower Gwynedd”).
- **Crew Size / Staffing on Initial Response:** Monitor the number of firefighters arriving on the initial alarm. One aim is to have more robust initial staffing. If previously a structure fire in North Wales might get four North Penn volunteers initially, now perhaps it gets eight from combined stations. KPI: average personnel on-scene within first ten minutes of alarm (target could be set per NFPA 1720 guidelines for adequate volunteer response).
 - **Incident Outcomes / Containment:** Though hard to quantify directly, use proxies like:
 - Percentage of fires contained to room of origin versus spreading beyond. If this improves over time, it suggests faster/more effective response (which consolidation should support).
 - Fire loss (\$) per fire incident; see if that decreases, adjusting for any outlier big incidents.
 - **Volunteer Retention & Recruitment:** Track number of active volunteer firefighters year after year. A KPI could be volunteer membership count and retention rate (how many leave each year). The goal is to at least maintain, ideally increase, volunteer numbers post-consolidation. Start with ~150 combined (just an example) and hope to have ≥150 one year in and to reduce turnover (perhaps reduce annual attrition from, say, 10% to 5%). Also track new recruits and ensure you are recruiting more effectively as one? (e.g., number of new volunteers joining and completing training per year).
 - **Training and Certification Levels:** Monitor how many members attain key certifications. For example, KPI 1: 100% of active interior firefighters to have Firefighter I within 1 year of consolidation. KPI 2: Increase Firefighter II certified members by X% in 2 years KPI 3: The number of multi-company drills held per quarter (target might be ≥2).
 - **Operational Readiness KPIs:** These include apparatus in-service rates (are you able to staff all needed apparatus?) or how often mutual aid is needed from outside because our own resources were insufficient. Aim to reduce external mutual aid dependence for initial response (not counting working fires where mutual aid is still normal).
 - **Financial Metrics:** Keep track of budget adherence and cost savings:
 - Did the consolidation operate within the combined budget (no overruns)? Financial stability is a KPI.
 - Measure cost savings or cost avoidance (e.g., amount saved through joint purchasing). Report how much cheaper a joint turnout gear order was vs separate and the reduction in per capital cost of fire service if that occurs.
 - Track fundraising levels to ensure the community continues to support the new department (target: match or exceed previous combined fundraising totals, indicating maintained public support).
 - **Community Outcomes and Satisfaction:** Use community feedback as a softer KPI:
 - Conduct a survey of residents or businesses after the first year and every couple of years (asking about satisfaction with fire services, perceived responsiveness). Aim for a certain satisfaction rate (like >90% positive).

- Also track ISO Public Protection Classification for the area. If the goal is to improve ISO score (say from Class 4 to Class 3 in areas with fire hydrants), that is a concrete indicator (though ISO reviews happen periodically, the fire department could perhaps request a re-evaluation a couple years after consolidation to see if improved training, apparatus distribution, and staffing raise the grade).
- **Incident Workload Distribution:** Ensure that no single station or subset is overtaxed. A KPI could be the number of calls per firefighter or per station to identify imbalance. If one station's volunteers are responding to a disproportionate call volume, there might be a need to adjust how calls are dispatched. Ideally, share the load so volunteer burnout is minimized (this is a qualitative KPI, but you can quantify by calls per active member).
- **Safety Metrics:** Monitor firefighter injury rates and near-miss reports. A successful consolidation with better training and staffing should ideally result in fewer injuries (due to safer operations from more help and better oversight). Therefore, track the number of reportable injuries per 100 incidents, aiming for a reduction.
- **Fire Loss and Civilian Injury/Fatality Rates:** Ultimately, improved service should reduce the toll of fires on life and property. Monitor civilian fire injuries/fatalities and property loss values year by year (though these fluctuate with luck, over a period a downward trend would validate improved prevention/response). One could express this as losses per 1,000 population per year, to normalize.

These KPIs should be reported regularly to the Fire Commission and municipalities (annually in a public report). If any are not meeting expectations, that will flag where to adjust tactics or allocate resources. For instance, if volunteer retention KPI shows a drop, there may be a need to enhance incentives or lighten the workload. If response times in a corner of the region are not improving, examine station staffing or apparatus placement.

By setting clear KPIs from the start, you create accountability for the consolidation's promises. It also helps tell the success story (e.g., "Since the regional department formed, average response times are down 15% and you have 20% more certified firefighters responding to each incident, leading to fires being contained faster with 0 civilian fire deaths in the past 2 years, showing the positive impact on public safety."). Those are powerful metrics to validate the effort and keep all stakeholders (volunteers, public, officials) supportive.

What-If Analysis for Fire Service Regionalization

This table presents three structured 'what-if' scenarios that municipal leaders can use to guide decision-making regarding fire service regionalization. Each scenario explores different time horizons and emphasizes operational performance, financial sustainability, and community/political considerations.

Scenario 1 – What if regionalization is fully implemented within 3 years?

Assumptions	Impacts	Risks	Opportunities	Decision Considerations
Municipalities approve a joint authority/commission.	Improved NFPA compliance (1720/1710).	Initial resistance from volunteers due to culture change.	Shared staffing reduces gaps in early morning and daytime response.	How will leaders manage culture change and keep volunteers engaged?
Shared apparatus plan adopted; duplication reduced.	Cost savings on apparatus replacement (5–10% over 10 years).	Political pushback if stations feel 'left behind.'	Stronger purchasing power for grants and state funding.	How will apparatus placement be communicated fairly?
Governance structure with rotating municipal leadership.	Consistent service delivery across borders.	Risk of legal/administrative disputes during startup.	Increased public trust through professionalized governance.	Is there political will to sustain joint leadership long-term?

Scenario 2 – What if regionalization is delayed 5–7 years?

Assumptions	Impacts	Risks	Opportunities	Decision Considerations
Status quo maintained with independent companies.	Continued duplication of apparatus and overlapping coverage zones.	Rising costs strain municipal budgets (apparatus, insurance, training).	More time to plan phased consolidation.	Can municipalities sustain higher costs while delaying?
Volunteer recruitment continues to decline.	Increased reliance on mutual aid, longer response times.	Greater risk of failing NFPA compliance benchmarks.	Opportunity to pilot shared staffing or stipend programs before full regionalization.	How long can municipalities maintain operational reliability under current trends?
No shared governance structure in place.	Decision fatigue among municipal leaders as issues re-emerge annually.	Risk of fragmented decision-making undermining trust.	Additional community engagement to build buy-in.	What public messaging will maintain trust during the delay?

Scenario 3 – What if regionalization fails or is rejected?

Assumptions	Impacts	Risks	Opportunities	Decision Considerations
Each municipality continues fully independent fire services.	Ongoing apparatus duplication, with uneven coverage.	Financial burden escalates; possible tax increases or reduced services.	Some municipalities retain strong local identity/control.	Are municipal budgets resilient enough to sustain independence?
Volunteer base erodes faster than anticipated.	Service gaps increase, reliance on career staff or contractors grows.	NFPA non-compliance increases liability exposure.	Opportunity for inter-municipal service contracts (partial regionalization).	Would partial contracts be politically acceptable as a fallback?
Public demand for accountability rises (after a major incident).	Leaders face criticism for not acting earlier.	Loss of credibility among elected officials.	Chance to revisit regionalization with urgency and public support.	How will leaders prepare a 'Plan B' in case full regionalization fails?

Regional Fire Service Standard of Cover

Upper Gwynedd Township, Lower Gwynedd Township, Ambler Borough, North Wales Borough, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Executive Summary

This Standard of Cover (SOC) provides a comprehensive, all-hazards framework for fire service delivery through the proposed regionalization of Upper Gwynedd Township, Lower Gwynedd Township, Ambler Borough, and North Wales Borough. The SOC establishes service expectations, deployment strategies, performance objectives, and risk-based benchmarks to ensure that the new regionalized department delivers effective, efficient, and equitable emergency services.

Section 1: Community and Regional Overview

Municipality	Population	Area (sq. miles)
Upper Gwynedd Township	17,100	8.0
Lower Gwynedd Township	12,100	9.3
Ambler Borough	6,500	0.85
North Wales Borough	3,300	0.6

Regional Population (2025 est.): ~37,300 | Total Area Covered: ~19 sq. miles

*Ambler Borough, North Wales Borough, Upper Gwynedd Township, Lower Gwynedd Township
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Section 2: Risk Assessment

The region faces diverse hazards including fire, EMS, hazardous materials, technical rescue, and natural disasters. Key risks include legacy industrial structures in Ambler, senior living facilities in Lower Gwynedd, transportation corridors, and flood-prone areas near Wissahickon Creek.

Section 3: Service Delivery Model (All-Hazards)

The regional fire service will provide comprehensive fire suppression, EMS, hazardous materials response, technical rescue, disaster management, and community risk reduction activities.

Section 4: Standards and Benchmarks

Benchmark	Performance Goal
First unit arrival	6–8 minutes (90% of incidents)
Effective response force	14–15 firefighters within 12 minutes (90% of incidents)
Turnout time	≤ 80 seconds (fire/EMS)

Model Ordinance

Regional Fire and Emergency Services Ordinance

Section 1. Title

This Ordinance shall be known and cited as the “Regional Fire and Emergency Services Ordinance of [Municipality].”

Section 2. Purpose and Intent

The purpose of this Ordinance is to:

- Promote the safety and well-being of the residents of [Municipality] through efficient, coordinated, and sustainable delivery of fire and emergency services.
- Establish the authority for [Municipality] to participate in a regional fire and emergency services organization with other municipalities.
- Provide a framework for cooperative governance, cost-sharing, and decision-making among participating municipalities.
- Ensure service delivery across all hazards, including fire suppression, emergency medical response, technical rescue, hazardous materials, disaster response, and community risk reduction.

Section 3. Authority

This Ordinance is adopted under the authority of the Pennsylvania Constitution, the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code, and the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act (53 Pa. C.S. § 2301 et seq.).

Section 4. Definitions

For the purposes of this Ordinance:

- Regional Fire and Emergency Services Organization (RFESO): A multi-municipal entity created to provide coordinated fire and emergency services.
- Participating Municipality: Any borough, township, or city that adopts this Ordinance or otherwise enters into the regional agreement.
- Board of Directors: The governing body of the RFESO, composed of appointed representatives from each participating municipality.
- All-Hazards Services: Fire suppression, fire prevention, emergency medical response, technical rescue, hazardous materials response, disaster response, and community risk reduction activities.

Section 5. Participation

[Municipality] hereby authorizes entry into an intergovernmental agreement with other municipalities to form and operate a Regional Fire and Emergency Services Organization.

Section 6. Governance

1. The RFESO will be governed by a Board of Directors.
2. Each participating municipality will appoint at least one representative to the Board.
3. The Board shall adopt bylaws establishing procedures for meetings, voting, leadership, and committees.
4. The Board shall be responsible for setting policy, approving budgets, overseeing administration, and ensuring compliance with applicable laws and standards.

Section 7. Funding and Cost Sharing

1. Costs of operating the RFESO shall be shared among participating municipalities.
2. The cost-sharing formula may consider population, call volume, property values, assessed taxes, or other equitable factors.
3. Each participating municipality shall include its share in its annual budget and remit payment to the RFESO in accordance with the intergovernmental agreement.

Section 8. Service Delivery

1. The RFESO shall provide fire and emergency services on an all-hazards basis to all participating municipalities.
2. The RFESO shall develop and maintain a Standard of Cover, risk assessment, and service plan that align with nationally recognized best practices.
3. Services shall be delivered without regard to municipal boundaries.

Section 9. Personnel

1. Personnel of the RFESO may include volunteers, part-time, and/or career staff as determined by the Board.
2. Training, certification, and conduct standards shall be consistent with federal, state, and recognized professional guidelines.
3. The RFESO shall provide for the recruitment, retention, and support of personnel.

Section 10. Assets and Facilities

1. Apparatus, equipment, and facilities may be contributed, purchased, or leased by the RFESO.
2. Ownership, maintenance, and disposition of assets shall be determined in the intergovernmental agreement.

Section 11. Liability and Insurance

The RFESO shall maintain appropriate insurance coverage, including liability, workers' compensation, property, and vehicle insurance. Participating municipalities will not be individually liable for acts or omissions of the RFESO beyond their financial contributions.

Section 12. Duration and Withdrawal

1. This Ordinance shall remain in effect unless repealed by [Municipality].
2. A municipality may withdraw from the RFESO by providing written notice to the Board and fulfilling any outstanding financial or contractual obligations.

Section 13. Severability

If any section, subsection, or clause of this Ordinance is found to be invalid, the remaining provisions shall remain in full force and effect.

Section 14. Effective Date

This Ordinance shall take effect immediately upon enactment.

Model Intergovernmental Cooperation Agreement

For the Establishment of a Regional Fire and Emergency Services Organization

Article I. Parties

This Agreement is entered into pursuant to the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act (53 Pa. C.S. § 2301 et seq.) by and among the following municipalities of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania:

- [Municipality A]
- [Municipality B]
- [Municipality C]
- [Municipality D]

(Collectively referred to as the “Participating Municipalities.”)

Article II. Purpose

The purpose of this Agreement is to establish a Regional Fire and Emergency Services Organization (RFESO) to provide coordinated, efficient, and sustainable fire and all-hazards emergency services to the Participating Municipalities.

Article III. Creation of the RFESO

1. The Participating Municipalities hereby create the RFESO as a multi-municipal cooperative entity.
2. The RFESO shall be recognized as an intergovernmental organization with authority to plan, operate, and deliver fire and emergency services across municipal boundaries.

Article IV. Scope of Services

The RFESO shall provide services on an all-hazards basis, including but not limited to:

- Fire suppression and fire prevention
- Emergency medical response support
- Technical rescue
- Hazardous materials response
- Disaster response and recovery
- Community risk reduction and public education.

Article V. Governance

1. The RFESO shall be governed by a Board of Directors.
2. Each Participating Municipality shall appoint one (1) voting representative to the Board. Alternate representatives may also be appointed.
3. The Board shall adopt bylaws governing meeting procedures, voting thresholds, committees, and leadership roles.
4. Decisions of the Board shall be binding upon all Participating Municipalities, except where financial obligations require approval of each municipal governing body.

Article VI. Funding and Cost Sharing

1. The RFESO shall adopt an annual budget to be approved by the Board.
2. Costs shall be apportioned among Participating Municipalities using an agreed formula, which may consider:
 - Population
 - Call volume
 - Assessed property value
 - Equal shares or other equitable factors
3. Each Participating Municipality agrees to appropriate and remits its share annually.

Article VII. Personnel

1. Personnel of the RFESO may include volunteer, part-time, or career staff.
2. Training, certification, and professional standards shall comply with federal, state, and recognized best practices.
3. Employment policies, benefits, and collective bargaining (if applicable) shall be administered by the RFESO.

Article VIII. Assets and Facilities

1. Fire stations, apparatus, and equipment may be contributed, leased, or purchased by the RFESO.
2. Ownership of assets shall be determined by written agreement and recorded by the Board.
3. In the event of dissolution, assets shall be distributed equitably based on prior contributions and agreements.

Article IX. Liability and Insurance

The RFESO shall maintain adequate insurance coverage, including general liability, workers' compensation, property, and vehicle coverage. Participating Municipalities shall not be individually liable for the acts or omissions of the RFESO beyond their agreed financial contributions.

Article X. Duration and Withdrawal

1. This Agreement shall remain in force until terminated by mutual consent of the Participating Municipalities.
2. Any municipality may withdraw by giving at least 12 months' written notice to the Board and fulfilling all outstanding obligations.
3. Upon withdrawal, cost-sharing and asset distribution shall be reconciled according to Board-adopted procedures.

Article XI. Amendments

This Agreement may be amended by resolution of the governing bodies of all Participating Municipalities.

Article XII. Severability

If any provision of this Agreement is determined to be invalid, the remaining provisions shall remain in effect.

Article XIII. Effective Date

This Agreement shall take effect upon adoption by ordinance of each Participating Municipality.

Article XIV. Signatures

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the duly authorized officials of the Participating Municipalities have executed this Agreement:

Municipality	Signature	Title	Date
[Municipality A]	_____	_____	_____
[Municipality B]	_____	_____	_____
[Municipality C]	_____	_____	_____
[Municipality D]	_____	_____	_____

Summary & Recommendations

This comprehensive study finds that consolidating the fire services of Upper Gwynedd, Lower Gwynedd, Ambler, and North Wales into a single regional fire department is both feasible and advantageous. The current volunteer fire companies provide commendable service, but they face mounting pressures, increasing call volumes, constrained staffing at certain times, and rising costs, which a fragmented approach struggles to address fully. Through regionalization, these four communities can achieve a stronger, more resilient fire protection system that preserves the volunteer tradition while adapting to modern demands.

Findings Summary: Each of the three fire companies brings valuable assets to the table. North Penn's community-focused dedication and EMS first-response capability, Wissahickon's large membership and technical rescue expertise, and Upper Gwynedd's robust apparatus and municipal support are all extremely valuable to the regionalization efforts. Yet, this analysis uncovered overlapping coverage, duplicated administrative efforts, and uneven distribution of workload. By forming one department, those inefficiencies are eliminated. The operational analysis indicates faster, and better-coordinated responses will result, as evidenced by similar consolidations (e.g., Bensalem's) where unified command and pooled resources improved emergency outcomes.

Benefits Recap: The benefits of consolidation are compelling. A regional fire department will deliver quicker response times, with more firefighters arriving sooner, enhancing the chances of saving lives and property. It allows for cost efficiencies, joint purchasing, shared specialized units, and a reduction of redundant apparatus can save taxpayer dollars or be reinvested in training and equipment. Standardized training and procedures will mean that no matter where an incident occurs or which crew responds, the community receives the same high standard of care. Volunteers will enjoy a broader support network and more opportunities, which helps recruitment and retention at a time when volunteerism is declining statewide. Importantly, all this is achieved without sacrificing local presence: each town will continue to have its fire station and community engagement, now backed by a larger organization.

Challenges Acknowledged: One cannot underestimate the challenges. Merging organizations requires sensitive handling of personnel and politics. The plan addresses these risks through inclusive planning, equitable governance, fair funding formulas, and a step-by-step integration process. The concerns of volunteers about identity and roles will be met with respect. Traditions will be honored even as a new unified culture is built. Political complexities, such as ensuring each municipality feels fairly treated in cost-sharing and decision-making, are mitigated by the recommended Fire Commission structure where all have a voice. With strong leadership commitment and open communication, these challenges are manageable. Indeed, throughout Pennsylvania and the nation, volunteer fire companies have successfully consolidated when guided by a clear vision and mutual trust.

Feasibility and Desirability: After careful analysis, the peer consultant found that consolidation is both feasible, technically and administratively, and highly desirable in terms of public safety outcomes. Feasible, because the infrastructure (stations, apparatus) is in place and complementary, and because there is a shared recognition among local leaders that "business as usual" must evolve to sustain volunteer fire services. Desirable, because it offers a proactive solution to current challenges, avoiding the alternative path of potentially diminished service or a far costlier fully paid model in the future if

volunteer ranks dwindled. Simply put, regionalization offers a path forward that strengthens emergency response while respecting fiscal responsibility and community values.

Looking forward, a successful consolidation in these four municipalities can become a model for the region and Montgomery County. It embodies the spirit that by working together, our communities can achieve more effective and efficient public safety services than any could alone. Residents can expect quicker help in their moments of need, firefighters will benefit from better support and training, and local governments will be investing wisely by sharing resources. Over time, anticipated improvements include a better ISO insurance rating (bringing potential insurance savings to residents) and perhaps expansion of services (like specialized rescue capabilities) that no single company could easily sustain alone.

The key next step is decisive yet thoughtful action: forming the joint governance framework, engaging all stakeholders in detailed implementation planning, and executing the consolidation in phases as recommended. By maintaining a professional, strategic, and empathetic tone throughout the process, as has been strived for in this report, the transition can be smooth and positive.

Final Thought: Volunteer firefighters have always been the backbone of local public safety, exemplifying dedication, and bravery. This consolidation honors that legacy by creating a structure that supports them better. It is an investment in the future of fire protection for Upper Gwynedd, Lower Gwynedd, Ambler, and North Wales; one that ensures that regardless of the day, time, or size of emergency, a well-equipped team of responders will arrive quickly, unified in purpose, to protect lives and property. With careful implementation of the recommendations in this report, the regional fire department will not only preserve the excellent service residents currently enjoy but elevate it, delivering safer communities and a stronger fire service for generations to come.

Recommendation 1: Formalize Regional Planning and Governance

- Establish a Regional Fire Services Steering Committee composed of elected officials, municipal managers, and fire service leadership.
- Develop a Shared Services Agreement (SSA) outlining roles, responsibilities, funding formulas, and service expectations.
- Pursue a feasibility study for a Regional Fire Authority or Commission to assess legal, financial, and operational implications.
- Hire or appoint a full-time Fire Chief supported by Deputy Chiefs for operations and administration.
- Create one nonprofit auxiliary to manage fundraising and relief funds across all stations.

Recommendation 2: Improve Staffing Sustainability and Response Reliability

- Implement a Regional Duty Crew Model using part-time or cross-jurisdictional staff during peak demand periods.
- Launch a joint volunteer recruitment campaign with pooled resources for marketing and onboarding.
- Leverage SAFER Grants to support stipends, tuition reimbursement, and recruitment efforts.

Recommendation 3: Standardize Operations and Training

- Develop Regional Standard Operating Guidelines (SOGs) to ensure consistency in tactical and administrative operations.
- Coordinate joint training schedules across departments with alignment to NFPA standards.
- Invest in a shared Learning Management System (LMS) to track training, certifications, and performance.

Recommendation 4: Optimize Apparatus and Facility Planning

- Create a regional apparatus replacement schedule to avoid redundancy and prioritize investment.
- Explore co-located or modernized fire stations in overlapping service areas.
- Standardize equipment and apparatus specifications for greater interoperability and procurement efficiency.

Recommendation 5: Expand Community Risk Reduction and Outreach

- Form a Regional Community Risk Reduction (CRR) Team to coordinate prevention programs.
- Deploy risk-based strategies targeting high-risk zones identified in the community risk assessment.
- Enhance public engagement through regional outreach, branding, and education efforts.
- Enhance flood and severe weather preparedness through GIS mapping and pre-incident planning.
- Translate emergency preparedness materials into multiple languages.

Recommendation 6: Modernize Technology and Communications

- Invest in regional CAD/dispatch upgrades to improve response coordination.
- Use GIS tools for coverage analysis, response time modeling, and station placement.
- Implement shared incident reporting systems and analytics tools for decision support.

Recommendation 7: Financial and Grant Strategy

- Develop an intermunicipal capital funding strategy based on proportional cost-sharing.
- Create a Regional Grant Task Force to pursue funding opportunities collaboratively.
- Conduct long-term financial modeling to evaluate regional cost benefits and efficiencies.

Recommendation 8: Risk & Sustainability

- Implement an intergovernmental agreement to reduce governance fragmentation.
- Preserve local identity by incorporating heritage branding in the regional department.
- Launch a regional volunteer recruitment and incentive program to mitigate volunteer decline.
- Develop a regional apparatus replacement plan and phased capital investment strategy.

Recommendation 9: Performance Monitoring & KPIs

- Track improvements in response times and crew sizes against NFPA 1720 benchmarks.
- Monitor volunteer retention, recruitment, and training certifications annually.
- Establish financial KPIs including joint purchasing savings and per-capita cost of service.
- Report annually on ISO rating improvements, community risk reduction outcomes, and resident satisfaction.

Acronyms

Acronym	Definition
AFA	Automatic Fire Alarm
ALS	Advance Life Support
BLS	Basic Life Support
CAD	Computer-Aided Dispatch
CFO	Chief Fire Officer
COG	Council of Governments
CRR	Community Risk Reduction
EFO	Executive Fire Officer
EMR	Emergency Medical Responder
EMS	Emergency Medical Services
EVOC	Emergency Vehicle Operators Course
FAQ	Frequently Asked Questions
FAST	Fire Assist and Search Team
FD	Fire Department
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
FF	Firefighter
FFII	Firefighter level II
FO	Fire Officer
GIS	Geographic Information System
GPM	Gallons Per Minute
HR	Human Resources
ICS	Incident Command System
ISO	Insurance Services Office
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LDH	Large Diameter Hose
LOSAP	Length of Service Award Program
NFIRS	National Fire Incident Reporting System
NFPA	National Fire Protection Association
NPVFC	North Penn Volunteer Fire Company
NW	North Wales
OIC	Officer in Charge
OSHA	Occupational Safety and Health Administration
PASS	Personal Alert Safety System
PFESI	Pennsylvania Fire & Emergency Services Institute
PM	Preventive Maintenance
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PR	Public Relations
QRS	Quick Response Service
ROI	Return on Investment
SCBA	Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus
SOG	Standard Operating Guideline
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
SWOT	Strength-Weaknesses-Opportunity-Threats
UG	Upper Gwynedd
UGFD	Upper Gwynedd Fire Department
UGTFD	Upper Gwynedd Township Fire Department
VFC	Volunteer Fire Company
WFC	Wissahickon Fire Company
WPVFC	West Point Volunteer Fire Company

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Notes