

REGIONAL FIRE SERVICES STUDY, FEBRUARY 2026
PA Department of Community and Economic Development's
Governor's Center for Local Government Services

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For Ambler Borough, Lower Gwynedd Twp, North Wales Borough and Upper Gwynedd Twp

Served by *Wissahickon FC, North Penn Volunteer FC, Upper Gwynedd Twp Fire Dept*

Municipality	2020 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

STUDY SCOPE OF WORK SUBMITTED TO DCED

Mission: To optimize resources by working together to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of fire protection services.

Goal: Business analysis that will enable us to examine the duplication of services and purchase of essential apparatus to sustain fire protection across our communities. The analysis shall include:

1. Structure of Sustainable Solution; New Department/Regional Board, etc.
2. NFPA 1720 compliance with minimum staffing and response time standards for volunteer fire companies
3. Fair Share Analysis and help crafting new intergovernmental agreement.
4. Help crafting new solution financially. How do previously held financials get worked out? Relief funds, investments, etc.
5. Review of current stations and analysis for which stations would be utilized and if a new station would be required.
6. Reduce duplication of efforts related to volunteerism, facilities, and vehicles.

STUDY'S STATED OBJECTIVES *(p. 1-3 in the Study)*

The goal of the study 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 municipal officials, fire department leadership, and community members with a comprehensive written analysis and actionable recommendations.

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.

STUDY'S STATED CONCLUSION

The study's 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.

A summary of the Study's findings and recommendations follows.

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.