

Township of Cheltenham

Montgomery County, Pennsylvania

Board of Commissioners

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Township Manager

Robert Zienkowski



Administration Building

8230 Old York Road
Elkins Park, PA 19027-1589

Phone: 215-887-1000
Fax: 215-887-1561
www.cheltenhamtownship.org

February 3, 2021

An Open Letter to Residents and Property Owners of Cheltenham Township

Dear Residents and Property Owners:

You may have recently heard that the Cheltenham Township Board of Commissioners voted to decertify the Ogontz Volunteer Fire Company. The decision was reached after an independent fire services consultant, funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED), concluded that there are certain weaknesses and redundancies in the Township's Fire Department, and following a presentation by the Fire Marshal detailing the below concerns with the Ogontz Fire Company.

Prior to the release of the DCED study, the Township had been working with all five of its fire companies to improve the provision of fire services to the community. The most pressing concerns with the Ogontz Fire Company were its inability to provide adequate manpower for fire protection and to address personnel problems and a lack of leadership. Since November 2019, the Board of Commissioners, Township Manager, Fire Marshal, Fire Board, and administration of the Ogontz Fire Company have been discussing these matters with no effective corrective actions taken by the Fire Company. Several times throughout 2020, Ogontz Fire Company was asked by staff and commissioners to provide the Township with a plan to address these problems, again with no actions taken by the Ogontz Fire Company.

The decision made by the Board of Commissioners was based on a recommendation of the Fire Marshal due to the company's inability to provide safe fire service to the community. Ogontz Fire Company failed to meet the requirements of Section 22-2, Fire Department Membership, of the Cheltenham Township Code of Ordinances, which states, "*Each volunteer fire company which is a member of the Department shall maintain an active fire-fighting force of at least 20 members and shall be subject to the control and jurisdiction of the Board of Township Commissioners. All active members of the fire companies who are 16 years of age or older shall be members of the Fire Department.*"

Ogontz Fire Company could not meet the requirement of an active fire-fighting force of at least 20 members, nor did it have a plan in place to boost its membership. Furthermore, in December, it became clear that after December 31, 2020, the Ogontz Fire Company would have no qualified individual in the position of Fire Chief. These factors led to the Board's decision on December 16, 2020 to decertify the Ogontz Fire Company as a fire protection entity of the Township, supported by two of the three remaining Fire Chiefs (with abstention from the Chief of Ogontz, Acting Chief of La Mott). The decision made by the Board of Commissioners will not affect the Township's current Insurance Service Office (ISO) fire

score rating of 4/10 (the lower the score, the better). The ISO does not mandate how many fire companies a municipality is required to have.

The remaining Cheltenham Township Fire Department Companies – Glenside, La Mott, Elkins Park and Cheltenham – will continue to provide improved fire protection to the area previously protected by the Ogontz Fire Company, with the next closest Fire Company, Elkins Park, being .8 of a mile from the Ogontz Fire Company station. The entire Cheltenham Township Fire Department continues to strive to be the “Gold Standard” in Fire Protection and continues to work together and with neighboring Townships and Boroughs to provide protection for Cheltenham Township lives and property.

If you have any questions regarding this matter, please contact the Cheltenham Township Fire Marshal, Scott Lynch, at 215-887-1000 ext. 235, or email him at slynch@cheltenham-township.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Zienkowski', enclosed in a light grey oval border.

Robert A. Zienkowski
Township Manager