

ST. JOSEPH COUNTY
Union Township Trustee Advisory Board
11 February 2025 Meeting Minutes

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Public Present: Eight people present. See sign-in sheet.

All board members were present. Marcel Lebbin Township Attorney was present.

Meeting called to order at 18:00 By Board president Trisha Carrico.

Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes

Ryan Made a motion to approve the minutes from the previous meeting. Trisha seconded. Motion passed.

New Business

Annual Financial Report:

Ryan mentioned that he had looked it over a few weeks ago. It has been cleaned up quite a bit for years past.

Kelly mentioned that she was able to remove the negative account balances from previous years, eliminate the Construction Fund and prior years Payroll Funds. Kelly mentioned that there are copies available if anyone is interested.

Trisha asked if there were any public comments.

With none heard, Ryan made a motion to approve, Mike Wozney seconded. Motion passed.

Bond Discussion:

Trisha asked the Township Attorney to explain.

Marcel stated that a bond could be secured to equip the ambulance, and fund EMT's to staff it for the next three years. This would increase the tax rates for the Township, and Union Township currently has one of the lowest tax rates in the county. He stated that if the Fire Territory were to expand, the tax rate would be similar to what it would be with the bond.

Public Question: Marcel was asked why would the Fire Territory expand?

He stated that the State of Indiana is pushing for larger Fire Territories. The preference is one fire territory per county. He does not believe that it will develop quite like that but believes that the stand-alone Fire Territories will not survive. There is just not enough money. He mentioned that bigger fire territories have economy of scale. Sharing resources can reduce costs. Tax rates currently are not sustainable long term. He used the example of the library: The tax rate for the library is greater than for the Fire Territory.

Kelly asked Marcel what he views the sustainability of our Township and Fire Territory with where we are currently? We have two people staffing the Fire Station and rely heavily on our volunteers and mutual aid departments.

Marcel stated that the window of changing the fire territory for 2026 is closing. You don't want to rush into something and not think it out well. There are lots of discussions around us, but none of those ideas touch us. Chief Willett commented that it is not an immediate need, but it is going to be necessary in the future to maintain service.

Kelly mentioned that this bond would be a quick fix to provide Ambulance service. It would provide funds to staff and operate the ambulance for three years.

Marcel mentioned that the bond would give an opportunity to re-evaluate the future of emergency services. This would be a patch, because in three years the money will be gone, and the budget will not support an Ambulance. We don't have an ambulance; we are less attractive to those who are looking to grow.

The County is currently providing an ambulance for the townships, but the City of South Bend is uncertain if they want to continue to contract with the county. Earlier this year South Bend nearly declined to contract with St Joseph County for EMS service. South Bend has limits also.

Ryan mentioned that if the Township feels it wants to pay for an ambulance service that is fine. He is of the school of thought that the current program is working.

Marcel mentioned that there is going to be big growth in housing in New Carlisle soon. New Carlisle is struggling to manage this. South Bend is stretched. This is why the discussions on realigning services are going on.

Kelly mentioned that in the past two years there has been a lot of change. Mostly positive. The thing is that the community is used to seeing an Ambulance in the area. People have no idea as to what goes on when they call 911. People have no idea as to where that ambulance is coming from. It is more of a fact that the community needs to get past that Union North Ambulance is no longer our provider. They are not providers anywhere today.

People do not know what they are getting when a Fire Truck arrives. They do not know what they are getting when an ambulance arrives, whether it is Basic Life Support, a Paramedic or what. The Bond will be paid back by the township, and not the Town of Lakeville taxes.

Marcel added that if the Town of Lakeville doesn't want to help, it is a short-term gain for the Town, but if the Fire Territory shifted, the Town would be put in a position to follow along with the Township or provide their own service. So once again, a bond would be a stopgap in the short term and long term the Town is going to have to pony up. Just like the Township if the bond issue passes. With that said, If the town decides not to come along, the Ambulance and those assets belong to the Township and not the Town. The Town could have a meeting and decide that they want to be part of the bond. As for the discussions that we have had in the past few years, I don't see them being very receptive to that. But they might.

Kelly mentioned that she feels that the community feels the need for an ambulance. Tricia agreed.

Kelly stated that if people were reading the writing on the wall, Union North Ambulance Service was 100% North Township board members. She didn't think that the future would include Union Township. This has become an ugly divorce.

The bond would be about .35 increase if this is what is wanted by the community.

Kelly asked how Chief Willett felt about it.

Chief Willett stated that he feels that the current operation of department is the best that they have ever been. He believes that we provide a top-notch service. South Bend has been flirting with discontinuing contracting with St Joseph County for Ambulance service. It was his understanding that this year they almost walked away completely. That would really leave us in a bad place. Again, we need to be more appealing to others that we may want to do business with us. Whether it be in the next two years, five years or when, it is inevitable that we are going to be part of a larger territory somewhere.

The Chief mentioned that the money we are looking at here is for a Basic Life Support Service. The same service that Union North Ambulance Service provided. Many times, the nature of the call required a Paramedic ambulance or some sort of Advanced level of care, and South Bend provided that service to us.

Kelly mentioned that she believes that what we currently are doing is a great thing, that even when we used Union North Ambulance, we had no guarantee of service. Monday through Friday there were people here during the day. But nights and weekends many times the Ambulance came from Lapaz and the responders came from their homes in Lapaz, to LaPaz Station, and then drove to Union Township.

When she spoke to people she was told that "You took our Ambulance" but what people didn't know is that an ambulance from South Bend many times was there anyway. But people say, "We want our ambulance back".

Marcel mentioned that the property taxes will likely see some relief in 2026. That this bond will likely not cause an increase in property taxes. There is going to be some sort of relief.

Public Comment: I think that it is good that you are talking about this now. People need to know what it costs to have an ambulance. You don't want to be like the Town and spring a big bill on people for a water tower that was 50 years old and all a sudden they realize that it needed to be replaced.

Kelly stated that she feels that there needs to be a meeting and explain that this is what we are looking at, if we bring back the Ambulance this is what it the expenses are for three years to operate. Let's see what the public thinks. As a taxpayer, I don't want my taxes to go up, but maybe it doesn't matter when I need that ambulance. And I really think we have an outstanding service without it, but this community feels we went backwards.

Ryan mentioned that the community really doesn't know what the level of service is that we currently offer. And that the contract with South Bend may not continue for much longer. And we may very well be forced to do something in the future.

Chief Willett mentioned that frequently on a serious call that as we are diagnosing the patient, getting vitals and addressing life threatening injuries, attaching the cardiac monitor by the time that is all done an ambulance has arrived.

He mentioned that getting an ambulance up and running would take time. It would take a year or so to get everything in place and people hired. There are many things that need to be done.

Trisha made a motion to move forward with the bond process, Ryan second. Motion passed.

Two options for the bond were discussed and presented.

Option 1:

1.3M would staff one additional person. This would have three people on duty every day. It would heavily rely on volunteers. It would replace the missing equipment on the ambulance and get it ready to be placed in service. Chief Willett stated that he doesn't like this option. If there is no volunteers available and the Ambulance is at the hospital this leaves one person at the Fire Station, which is not adequate staffing.

Option 2:

1.9M would staff two additional people. This would give us four people on duty every day. It would replace the missing equipment on the ambulance and get it ready to be placed in service.

Trisha made a motion to go with option two. Ryan seconded. Motion passed.

Food distribution:

Kelly asked Ryan to speak on this.

Ryan stated that he stopped in, and that he thought it went well. There were about 150 bags of various foods given out. It seemed well received.

It was not based on a need basis but open to everyone to just stop in and you got a big bag of food.

Cultivate is looking for a place to do food distribution every month. It takes about five hours or so from beginning to end. It takes a lot of help and volunteers. The American Legion took the remaining food.

Kelly mentioned that the Firemen were the face of this, and people really liked that. Hopefully we can do this once a quarter or something like that.

Ryan stated that it takes a lot of help. He thought to reach out to other groups that may be willing to assist. Maybe the board members could help, FFA, Town Board members, maybe the American Legion or the churches?

We need to remember that we don't want to burden the Firemen.

Chief Willett was reluctant to do it every month; he didn't want for people to get used to it and then the Fire Department was the only one doing it. Hopefully other groups will help. As the weather warms up the help will get harder to find.

Old Business.

No old business was discussed

Public Comments:

No further comments

Next meeting will be a bond hearing TBD

Trisha made a motion to Adjourn at 6:50PM

Motion Passed

Minutes approved 11th day of March, 2025.