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Local Assistance Bureau



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### **Township of Neptune Fire District No. 1 Assessment Report**

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## **Executive Summary**

For the last century, most communities in the United States and New Jersey have been served by volunteers and career firefighting services. The people serving our communities have sacrificed their time and their lives to serve the needs of all of us and we must pay homage through continued respect and recognition of their daily efforts. Our firefighters must be valued, celebrated and respected while serving the people of New Jersey.

Due to socioeconomic demands and a decline in volunteerism nationwide, the fire service is changing dramatically and is impacting every fire department in New Jersey and operational and financial changes are necessary to sustain future operations.

Neptune Township Fire District #1 ("Fire District") requested technical assistance from the Division of Local Government Services ("DLGS") Local Assistance Bureau ("LAB") to evaluate its current operational, organizational, and financial condition, with the goal of identifying opportunities to improve fire protection services. The review included assessments of Fire District staffing, deployment practices, apparatus, facility utilization, operational trends, structure, and financial conditions. Interviews were conducted with Fire Commissioners, operational leadership, volunteer members, and other stakeholders. Financial documents, operational reports, apparatus data, and historical studies were also reviewed by DLGS staff conducting the study.

The analysis found that the Fire District is currently operating under a hybrid staffing model that combines volunteer firefighters, career staffing, duty crew programs, and mutual aid to supplement staffing and sustain operational readiness and response capability. Although these efforts have improved baseline coverage and stabilized portions of the response system, they also demonstrate the continued decline of the traditional volunteer staffing model and rising dependence on scheduled staffing.

The review identified several significant operational and organizational challenges, including:

- Declining volunteer participation and staffing availability
- Heavy reliance on a limited number of active responders
- Increasing dependence on career staffing and duty crew systems
- Fragmented organizational structure and company-based operations
- Inefficient apparatus and facility utilization and deployment
- Rapidly escalating operational and capital costs

- Lack of long-term strategic plans for staffing and deployment, and recruitment and retention
- Expanded deficiencies that were identified in the 1998 Fire and Emergency Services Assessment

The analysis also determined that many of the concerns identified in the 1998 Harry Carter Assessment remain present today and, in several areas, are accelerating. While the Fire District has implemented adaptive operational measures, including career staffing and volunteer duty crews, these measures deal with immediate staffing shortages rather than the underlying structural and organizational limitations of the current operational model.

Operationally, the Fire District continues to function due to the commitment of a limited number of active volunteer responders and the increasing use of career staffing. Participation analysis shows that a small core group of firefighters comprises most emergency responses, while a substantial portion of the membership remains minimally active or inactive. This trend is consistent with statewide and national patterns in the volunteer fire service and reflects an ongoing, likely irreversible transition away from the traditional model.

Financially, the Fire District is experiencing significant increases in appropriations, capital expenditures, personnel costs, and operational expenses. Although these expenditures are necessary to maintain service delivery, the established organizational model requires increasing investments to sustain an individual-company structure that is no longer aligned with actual staffing capacity. The continued expansion of career staffing and the duty crew program, combined with the maintenance of multiple facilities, apparatus, and company-based operations, raises sustainability concerns.

The findings of this report indicate that the Fire District must continue transitioning toward a more unified, department-based operational structure that focuses on public safety, staffing efficiency, centralized deployment, and long-term sustainability in place of historical organizational boundaries and individual company identities.

The purpose of this report is not to diminish the dedication or service of the volunteer firefighters and leadership who continue to serve the community, but rather to identify structural realities and provide recommendations intended to ensure the continued delivery of safe, reliable, and financially sustainable fire protection services to the residents of Neptune Township.

## **Introduction**

Neptune Township (“Township”) is a suburban community located in Monmouth County, New Jersey. The Township is bordered by several municipalities, including Ocean Township, Wall Township, Neptune City, and the City of Asbury Park, and is situated along the Jersey Shore. This geographic location contributes to both a stable residential population and seasonal fluctuations that impact service demand. The Township has an estimated population of 28,000 residents and consists of a diverse mix of residential neighborhoods, commercial areas, and institutional occupancies, all of which influence fire protection and emergency response requirements.

A fire district is a local governmental entity responsible for delivering fire protection services within a defined geographic area. Fire districts operate independently of municipal governments and are governed by a publicly elected board of fire commissioners, which oversees budgets, and provides policy direction for fire protection services. Fire protection and prevention services within the Township are provided by the Fire District.

The Fire District provides services through contractual agreements with four volunteer fire companies: Hamilton Fire Company (Station 1), Liberty Fire Company (Station 2), Shark River Hills Fire Company (Station 3), and Unexcelled Fire Company (Station 4). An analysis of the operations revealed that most of the fire commissioners are also members of the individual companies.

To address staffing difficulties and maintain operational coverage, the volunteer system is supplemented by career personnel. The Fire District currently staffs a career engine company operating Monday through Friday from 5:00 AM to 9:00 PM to provide consistent daytime response capability. The Fire District has also implemented an approved duty crew program to enhance overnight and weekend coverage. This program provides volunteer staffing from 9:00 PM to 5:00 AM, Monday through Friday, and 24-hour coverage on weekends that is divided into three operational shifts: 5:00 AM to 1:00 PM, 1:00 PM to 9:00 PM, and 9:00 PM to 5:00 AM. Duty crews are typically staffed by four volunteer members drawn from across the fire companies, with a minimum of three, when necessary, though this is reported to be infrequent. All of these members receive compensation for their duty crew shifts.

## **Scope of Work**

The DLGS, LAB Municipal Technical Advisors/fire specialists (“Technical Advisors”) were requested to provide technical assistance to review the Fire District's operations and proficiency. Specifically, the review of relevant ordinances, fire department staffing levels, fire service funding, and other fire-related policies to identify opportunities for efficiency. In short, the LAB was tasked with helping the Township’s residents receive the best fire service possible for their tax dollars.

To achieve this objective, the Technical Advisors interviewed the fire commissioners, volunteer members, and operational leaders, including the Fire Chief. The Technical Advisors also reviewed key documents, including Fire District budgets, relevant ordinances, the municipal

website, and portions of the municipal code, performed a site visit to evaluate operations and conducted a survey of the Fire District members. Following the site visit, additional documents were requested, and follow-up phone conferences were held to obtain additional information.

The DLGS Technical Advisors received full cooperation from all Township and Fire District employees and staff. Their cooperation and assistance attest to their inclination to embrace change. What follows are DLGS's recommendations and observations to make an already strong fire service even stronger and more effective as it enters a new operational era.

During the interview process, DLGS Technical Advisors gained a better understanding of the Fire District's day-to-day operations. This study includes, but is not limited to, staffing analysis, fleet evaluation, operational issues, best practices, and firefighting policies and procedures.

## **Objective/Deployment Plan**

The analysis of the Fire District's operations determined the recommended staffing, equipment, and operational practices for the organization, including call volume, organizational structure, industry patterns, and work schedules.

Fire service sustainability and staffing analysis must consider and evaluate risk, deployment, staffing, and fiscal capacity. The analysis considers community risk, response capability, staffing levels, and financial capacity to continue operations over time.

The Fire District's current structure embodies a fixed-cost operational model that supports a limited response volume and tax base and requires supplemental staffing using shared service agreements to maintain regulatory compliance. These factors indicate dependence upon external resources and limited independent operational capacity, both of which are key indicators to assess long-term sustainability.

## **Study Team Members**

The staff of the DLGS Technical Advisors conducted this analysis. The lead investigators are members of the public safety liaison team within the DLGS. This team consists of personnel who have studied police and fire departments of many local governments within the State of New Jersey.

With combined experience of more than 75 years, the LAB Technical Advisors have provided staffing levels for fire agencies in accordance with accepted industry standards and procedures. The DLGS Technical Advisors have also supervised other municipalities, including Atlantic City, Camden, Trenton, Newark, Asbury Park, Nutley, Paterson, Penns Grove, and Salem City, and in some cases managed their day-to-day operations.

Since the LAB's inception in 2019, the DLGS public safety liaison team has continuously monitored public safety departments and gained working knowledge of their past and present staffing models.

## **Methodology To Determine Staffing**

Following the review of several fire service practices, the DLGS Technical Advisors have learned that there is no universal way to organize and staff a fire department. Every fire department must be structured to satisfy the specific needs of the community it serves. However, the principles recommended in this report have been used by fire agencies across New Jersey and the United States.

These organizational principles have proven valid over time. However, data and staffing formulas are not the only factors to consider when determining the appropriate staffing levels in a fire agency. These additional factors are outlined below.

## **Fire Service Standards**

The following standards, accepted practices, and information were utilized to formulate the proposed structure and staffing analysis used during this assessment:

- The Fire Chief's Handbook 7th Edition
- NFPA 1710 Standard for the Organization and Deployment of Fire Suppression Operations, Emergency Medical Operations, and Special Operations to the Public by Career Fire Departments
- New Jersey Statutes
- The International Association of Fire Chiefs
- PEOSHA Standards
- New Jersey Division of Fire Safety Reference Booklet #9 – Model Fire Department Incident Management Standard Operating Guidelines
- ICMA Managing Fire and Emergency Services
- Neptune Fire District #1 – 1998 Neptune Fire District Assessment Study by Dr. Harry Carter

## **Commentary on the Concept of Span of Control**

Span of control refers to the number of personnel a single individual directly supervises. Within a fire department, multiple factors must be evaluated when determining the appropriate supervisory span of control. Best industry practices recommend an optimal ratio of three (3) to five (5) firefighters per supervisor, with a maximum of seven (7).

## **Findings of Neptune Fire District Operations**

However, due to socioeconomic changes, and ongoing difficulties with recruiting volunteers, changes in the delivery of fire services throughout New Jersey and across the United States have vastly changed. Fire Districts across the United States have taken steps to improve fire protection services in a manner that is both proficient and sustainable. Historically, the Fire District has provided a high level of service to the community through a volunteer-based system. However, based on operational reviews and stakeholder input, volunteer participation

has steadily declined, mirroring the national trend. Recruitment and retention efforts have yielded limited success. This is largely due to increased time commitments, training requirements exceeding 200 hours for initial certification, and competing personal and professional obligations. This is not only a regional or Neptune problem but also a nationwide trend.

Consistent with national fire service trends, the demand for service has increased. While the number of structural fires has decreased due to improvements in fire prevention, building construction, and detection systems, the overall call volume and incident complexity have increased. The Fire District is now routinely relied upon for a broad range of emergency responses, including motor vehicle accidents, hazardous materials incidents, technical rescues, and other all-hazard events, as well as providing mutual aid to other communities.

Even with efforts to adapt, the analysis indicates that the Fire District remains heavily dependent on a limited number of active responders, while a significant portion of the membership does not regularly participate in emergency response activities. Volunteer staffing alone is insufficient to consistently meet industry standards, including safe fireground practices and regulatory requirements such as OSHA 2-in/2-out and NIMS compliance.

Notably, many of these problems were identified in the 1998 Fire and Emergency Services Assessment, which included the individual company structure, due to insufficient staffing. These conditions have not only persisted but have accelerated, showing a clear and irreversible trend in the evolution of the volunteer fire service. The current state demonstrates that the model of multiple independent companies operating with limited active membership is no longer sustainable in its existing form.

While the continued expansion of career staffing may provide short-term improvements in response reliability, it also brings substantial long-term financial obligations, including salaries, pension contributions, healthcare costs, and retirement liabilities. For the Fire District to ensure the continued delivery of effective fire protection services, a shift in organizational approach is required. This shift includes moving away from a company-based model toward a unified, department-based system that prioritizes community risk and operational functionality over historical organizational boundaries. This transition will likely require consolidating operational resources and reallocating staffing to align with actual response capacities.

This report references nationally recognized fire service standards, including NFPA 1710 and NFPA 1720, as performance benchmarks rather than legal mandates. While these standards have not been adopted into law in the State of New Jersey, they are widely recognized throughout the fire service as industry consensus standards for evaluating staffing, deployment, and operational readiness. They provide an objective framework for assessing whether a fire department is organized and staffed to effectively manage emergency incidents while promoting firefighters and public safety.

Based on the information reviewed during this assessment, the Fire District's current staffing and deployment practices do not consistently align with the performance objectives outlined in NFPA 1710/1720. Although failure to meet these benchmarks does not, by itself, establish negligence or legal liability, documented operational deficiencies should be viewed as organizational risks requiring continued evaluation and corrective action. Nationally recognized consensus standards are frequently referenced by fire service professionals, accrediting

organizations, and expert witnesses when evaluating accepted fire service practices following significant incidents.

The Fire District should evaluate its current response model, establish formal deployment and staffing policies that reflect the principles of NFPA 1710/1720 as appropriate for its organization, and review those policies on an annual basis. Particular attention should be given to establishing minimum apparatus staffing, improving the initial effective response force, and identifying sustainable methods to achieve those objectives. Depending on the District's operational and financial circumstances, potential solutions may include the hiring of additional personnel, consolidation or shared-service initiatives, enhanced automatic aid agreements, or other deployment strategies that improve response capability while maintaining fiscal responsibility.

Ultimately, the Fire District needs to adopt a cooperative, public-safety-focused mindset that emphasizes collaboration, efficiency, and sustainability. This will require all stakeholders, including Fire Commissioners, fire company members, and current and future leadership, to work collectively toward a shared goal of providing reliable, safe, and effective fire protection services to the residents of Neptune Township.

## **Comparison to 1998 Fire and Emergency Services Assessment**

A review of the 1998 Neptune Fire District Assessment by Dr. Harry Carter shows that several key recommendations to improve structure, staffing, and operations were not fully implemented. As a result, many issues have persisted, contributing to current challenges. The 1998 report recommended developing a unified, township-wide fire department to replace the existing company-based structure. This recommendation was intended to improve coordination, standardization, and overall operational capability.

Despite some improvements, the Fire District still operates through multiple companies with varying participation and capability. Without full consolidation, fragmentation, inconsistent staffing, and deployment inefficiencies persist. The failure to fully implement prior recommendations has contributed to:

- Continued staffing deficiencies and inconsistent response capability
- Increased reliance on a limited number of active personnel
- Expanded dependence on career staffing, overtime, and alternative staffing programs
- Inefficient use of apparatus and facilities
- Ongoing operational fragmentation

These challenges are a continuation of issues identified over two decades ago, not just recent developments. While some adaptive steps have been taken, the inadequate implementation of the 1998 recommendations have limited their effectiveness. To ensure service delivery, sustainability, and effectiveness, the Fire District must address longstanding issues through comprehensive organizational and governance reform. Adapting to and implementing previous recommendations is critical.

## Call Volume

An analysis of incident data, apparatus use, and personnel participation was conducted to assess operational demand, response distribution, and system efficiency. Based on NFIRS reporting, the Fire District responded to approximately 1,053 incidents in 2025, representing the total calls for service within the Township. This figure reflects the actual number of emergency events requiring Fire District response. Although call volume matches similar communities, the main challenge is consistently staffing and responding to incidents, not the number of calls.

Apparatus utilization review shows that most response activity is covered by chief officers using primary engines. Many of the apparatuses are used far less frequently. The following members are considered major contributors for 2024 and 2025 response:

| Member            | 2024 Points | 2025 Points | Company    |
|-------------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| MAURO, JOSEPH     | 396         | 180         | Unexcelled |
| FRITZ JR, ALBERT  | 261         | 276         | SRH        |
| MEGILL, NICHOLAS  | 237         | 217         | Unexcelled |
| HENDERSON, OTIS   | 197         | 145         | Unexcelled |
| BORGES, CHARLES   | 193         | 245         | Unexcelled |
| FREEMAN, CHAKA    | 172         | 308         | Liberty    |
| REEVEY, CHARLES   | 142         | 180         | Unexcelled |
| RYSTEPHANUK, JOHN | 127         | 148         | Unexcelled |

The next group is considered mid-level participants, but is an inconsistent group of responders:

| Member          | 2024 | 2025 | Company    |
|-----------------|------|------|------------|
| BUTLER, ANDRE   | 98   | 115  | Unexcelled |
| CARLSON, LOUIS  | 120  | 133  | Unexcelled |
| CHATMON, ELIJAH | 61   | 40   | Liberty    |
| PURYEAR, TODD   | 61   | 98   | Liberty    |

|                   |    |     |          |
|-------------------|----|-----|----------|
| PURYEAR, TYRON    | 74 | 241 | Liberty  |
| HOECKER, DAVID    | 50 | 42  | SRH      |
| NIEDENSTEIN, JAKE | 50 | 44  | Hamilton |

Although the Fire District has about 150 members across four volunteer companies, only a small number consistently participate in emergency responses. The current staffing model relies heavily on one core group and creates an imbalance in personnel and apparatus deployment. As stated, a small core group handles most responses, while many members participate little or not at all. The combined analysis of call volume, apparatus utilization, and personnel participation highlights several critical operational realities:

- The Fire District is responsible for over 1,000 incidents annually, requiring consistent and reliable response capabilities
- Response reliability depends on career staffing and a small core group of volunteers
- Apparatus deployment is dictated by staffing availability rather than optimized placement
- Volunteer participation alone is insufficient to sustain independent company-based operations
- Duty crew programs and hybrid staffing models are necessary to maintain minimum operational readiness

Adaptive measures, such as hiring additional career staff and implementing incentivized duty-crew programs, address immediate needs but do not address structural limitations. The current model concentrates workload on select apparatus and personnel, underutilizes parts of the fleet, increases reliance on scheduled staffing and overtime, and limits flexibility. The data supports the need for:

- Strategic staffing alignment
- Organizational consolidation
- Increased operational centralization
- Reduction in reliance on company-based staffing models
- A district-wide, public safety-focused approach to fire protection services
- Additional staff and implementation of automatic aid to ensure NFPA 1710/1720 standards are met

Current participation trends indicate a likely permanent shift from the traditional volunteer model to a hybrid structure that requires greater coordination, supervision, a more efficient staffing plan, and maintaining a centralized deployment plan.

## **FIRE APPARATUS/EQUIPMENT**

Apparatus, equipment, and maintenance are the most significant fire service expenses. Ladder trucks can cost more than \$1.5 million. It is essential to purchase and maintain only the necessary number of apparatuses. A master inventory and replacement schedule should be maintained to support capital planning and avoid unexpected costs. Maintenance and replacement should be based on operational needs, service calls, age, and mileage. Apparatus should remain in service as long as possible without compromising safety or response time. The DLGS Technical Advisor's review found that the Fire District has more apparatus than available responders.

The following vehicle information was based on information obtained during the interview and review process, including a review of documents and data provided by the Fire District:

| <b>Year</b> | <b>Make</b> | <b>Model</b> | <b>Condition</b> | <b>Type</b>                                     |
|-------------|-------------|--------------|------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| 2024        | Chevy       | Tahoe        | Excellent        | Fire Chief - Support                            |
| 2023        | Chevy       | Tahoe        | Excellent        | Fire Chief - Support                            |
| 2020        | Chevy       | Tahoe        | Excellent        | Fire Inspector- Support                         |
| 2020        | Chevy       | Tahoe        | Excellent        | Fire Inspector- Support                         |
| 2016        | Chevy       | Tahoe        | Good             | Fire Administrator- Support                     |
| 2019        | Ford        | F250         | Excellent        | Utility - Support                               |
| 2012        | Ford        | F350         | Good             | Utility - Support                               |
| 2008        | Ford        | F350         | Good             | Utility - Special Ops - Support                 |
| 1995        | Dodge       | Ram          | Good             | Brush Truck                                     |
| 2024        | Pierce      | Enforcer     | Excellent        | Engine-1st Due<br>Unexcelled Station 4          |
| 2020        | Pierce      | Enforcer     | Excellent        | Engine - 1st Due<br>Shark River Hills Station 3 |
| 2017        | Pierce      | Enforcer     | Excellent        | Light Rescue / Cascade<br>Liberty Station 2     |
| 2015        | Pierce      | Velocity     | Good             | Engine - Spare department-<br>wide              |

|      |         |          |           |                                                |
|------|---------|----------|-----------|------------------------------------------------|
|      |         |          |           | Shark River Hills Station 3                    |
| 2014 | Pierce  | Arrow XT | Excellent | Tower Ladder - Hamilton Station 1              |
| 2014 | Pierce  | Arrow XT | Fair      | Career Division Engine                         |
| 2009 | Crimson | Spartan  | Poor      | Tower Ladder - Unexcelled Station 4 - For Sale |
| 2007 | Pierce  | Enforcer | Good      | Engine - Liberty Station 2                     |

The 2009 Crimson Tower ladder is for sale. There are discussions about relocating an engine to Station 4, and Station 3 are researching and considering a “Quint” that can function as both an engine and a ladder this was communicated during the research phase of the study.

The fleet size should be determined based on established staffing levels for career and volunteer responders. If consolidation occurs, facilities and apparatus should be evaluated to meet the Fire District's needs and capacity, with the goal of assuring reliable fire protection services and reducing administrative and operational service duplication.

## **FACILITY REVIEW**

A preliminary facility review was completed. It is recommended that the Fire District engineer conduct a detailed analysis to determine repair needs. If consolidation occurs, the facility’s role within the new area should be evaluated.

- Station 1 – Hamilton Fire Company is currently owned by the fire company and is the largest property of the participating companies. The facility has tremendous bay storage capacity and a large parking lot. The career division uses it to store equipment when not in service. Of the data reviewed on participation, only one member was in a mid-level participation group.
- Station 2 – Liberty Fire Company is currently owned by the Fire District. The facility has limited parking and storage for apparatus. The building is currently undergoing extensive roof repairs involving potential asbestos-containing materials, and there are structural concerns with the parapet. The Neptune Fire District does not have an in station cascade system, the light rescue that is stationed at this facility is utilized district wide to refill air cylinders.
- Station 3 – Shark River Hills is currently owned by the fire company. The facility has a large parking lot, an additional outbuilding used for storage and two apparatus bays The facility is also used by the Fire District for storing personal protective equipment, gear-

washing, and drying equipment and a public meeting area and for department-wide training.

- Station 4 – Unexcelled Fire Company is owned by the Fire District. The facility also serves as the Fire District's office for business administration and fire prevention . The facility has limited parking and has two apparatus bays. The construction of bunk quarters for the duty crew are underway. The facility also has personal protective equipment, gear washing, and drying equipment available for use by the entire Fire District.

## **FINANCIAL REVIEW**

An analysis of the 2025 budget and the proposed 2026 budget shows total appropriations increased from about \$6.13 million to \$7.61 million, a 24% rise. This increase is driven by higher staffing, capital, and maintenance costs.

The amount to be raised by taxation remained relatively stable and are found below:

- **2025:** \$3,514,422
- **2026:** \$3,466,606

The 2026 amount to be raised by taxation reflects a slight decrease. However, the stability in taxation is offset by an increased reliance on other funding sources, particularly fund balance. Surplus fund balance usage increased significantly:

- **2025:** \$2,455,000
- **2026:** \$3,925,000

This trend shows a growing reliance on reserves to support operations, which are not sustainable in the long term.

Capital appropriations also increased significantly:

- **2025:** \$1,450,000
- **2026:** \$2,920,000

This is due to investments in apparatus, infrastructure, and equipment. Thus, increasing long-term financial obligations. Capital spending must align with operational capacity and staffing. The rise in appropriations is mainly due to:

- Expansion of career staffing and the duty crew program
- Contractual obligations that include increased salaries, wages, and benefits

Operations and maintenance costs have increased due to:

- Equipment maintenance
- Uniforms and gear
- Facility upkeep
- General inflation

The 2026 budget proposes higher operating expenses due to inflation and rising service costs, contributing to overall budget growth. The financial data shows several key trends:

- Increasing reliance on career staffing and associated costs
- Significant use of fund balance to offset operating expenses
- Rapid growth in capital spending
- Rising operational and maintenance costs

These expenditures support service delivery, but indicate the current model is becoming too expensive to sustain.

The Fire District operates as a hybrid system that requires:

- Career staffing to ensure daytime coverage
- Duty crew programs to supplement volunteer response
- Continued support of multiple fire company facilities and apparatus

The 2025–2026 financial analysis shows significant budget growth driven by the need for increased staffing, inflation, and capital and operational costs. While it is necessary for the Fire District to maintain service, these budget increases are in response to declining volunteerism through spending that necessitate the need for structural reform. To ensure long-term financial sustainability and effective fire protection, the Fire District must align its financial resources with a modernized operational structure. If these issues are not addressed, budget growth, reliance on reserves, and long-term financial obligations will increase without the necessary improvements required for operational success.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Fire District continues to provide essential public safety services through its dedicated volunteer and career personnel. However, the current structure is under increasing strain from declining volunteer participation, rising demands, growing financial obligations, and reliance on a small group of active responders. To counter these trends, the Fire District has implemented career staffing, duty crew programs, and supplemental arrangements to address these challenges. While these measures have improved short-term reliability, they remain adaptive measures within a system that still faces the structural limitations identified in 1998 and will not sustain current economic factors.

Current data and trends show that the traditional company-based volunteer model is no longer sustainable. Without organizational reform, these pressures will likely intensify, strain staffing, increase financial costs, and ultimately reduce effectiveness.

The viability of the Fire District's future will depend on its ability to transition from a historically fragmented organizational structure to a more centralized, operationally unified public safety model. This transition must focus on:

- Reliable staffing and deployment
- Centralized administrative and operational decision-making process
- Reduced duplication of resources and services
- Strategic apparatus and facility planning
- Long-term financial sustainability
- Improved firefighter deployment and public safety response

The Fire District must continue to evolve in line with modern fire service practices, staffing realities, and community expectations. The challenges outlined in this report are not unique to the Fire District but reflect broader statewide and national trends affecting volunteer fire services. Long-term success will require cooperation among Fire Commissioners, company leadership, personnel, Neptune Township officials, and stakeholders. Future decisions should prioritize efficient reliability, and sustainable fire protection based on operational need and public safety, not historical structures or individual interests.

## **Strategic Plan Recommendations**

The following recommendations are intended to supplement the 1998 Neptune Fire District Assessment and provide a structured roadmap for implementation to assist the Fire District's Board of Fire Commissioners, operational leadership, Township officials, and stakeholders in developing a long-term plan for the Fire District.

The Board of Fire Commissioners should review its governance structure to ensure policy decisions are made in the best interest of all members of the Fire District. and should receive annual training that emphasizes district-wide strategic planning, financial stewardship, ethics, governance and public accountability.

Develop an integrated Fire District plan that preserves the historical heritage of each fire company through standardized branding, policies, training, communications, and operational expectations..

Develop a formal management strategy that includes transparency with regular communication, member involvement, education, and opportunities for feedback throughout the implementation process. The would require stakeholders to recognize that meaningful organizational change includes deliberate planning, transparent communication, stakeholder engagement, and phased implementation.

As organizational changes are considered, Fire District leadership should preserve the history, traditions, memorials, and identities of each fire company through historical archives, recognition programs, museum-quality displays, and ceremonial traditions. Organizational modernization should enhance operational effectiveness while honoring the service and sacrifices of previous generations.

## **Establish a Steering Committee**

The Board of Fire Commissioners should establish a Steering Committee comprised of representatives from all major stakeholders with a vested interest in the future of the Fire District. The committee should include Fire Commissioners, career and volunteer operational leadership, labor representatives, company leadership, municipal representatives as appropriate, and other subject matter experts who can provide objective perspectives on fire protection, governance, finance, and organizational sustainability. Committee members should be selected based on their ability to contribute to long-term strategic planning rather than advocate for individual organizations, stations, or personal interests.

The Steering Committee's purpose is to develop a unified long-term vision for the Fire District before significant operational, financial, or organizational decisions are made. The committee should evaluate current conditions, identify future service demands, and develop a strategic roadmap that guides staffing, deployment, capital investments, governance, and organizational structure over the next decade. All recommendations should be data-driven, focused on public safety, operational effectiveness, fiscal responsibility, and the long-term sustainability of the Fire District.

To guide its work, the Steering Committee should address five fundamental questions:

1. What level of fire and emergency service should every resident reasonably expect?
2. What organizational structure best supports that level of service?
3. What staffing and financial models will sustain that level of service today and over the next decade?
4. What should the Fire District look like in 2036?
5. What investments in personnel, facilities, apparatus, technology, and governance are necessary to achieve that vision?

By first establishing a shared long-term vision, the Fire District can avoid making individual operational or financial decisions that conflict with an overarching strategic plan. Future investments in personnel, facilities, apparatus, and governance should support a common vision rather than responding to isolated short-term challenges. Collectively, these recommendations address many of the same challenges identified in the 1998 Assessment Report, including declining volunteer participation, increasing reliance on career staffing, fragmented operations, rising costs, and the need for a more unified and sustainable service delivery model. Rather than reacting to current challenges, this process positions the Fire District to intentionally shape its future. The following are additional strategic concerns that need to be addressed by the steering committee:

- Establish a representative committee consisting of Fire Commissioners, volunteer operational leadership, career fire personnel/labor representatives, fire company representatives, Fire District administration, Township representation (as appropriate), and industry technical advisors. The committee should develop a shared vision and implementation roadmap focused on firefighter safety, operational effectiveness, fiscal responsibility, and long-term sustainability.
- The Committee should establish the most effective organizational structure by reviewing command, administration, staffing, deployment, facilities, fleet, and operating costs. This includes examining current locations and determining a consolidation plan that meets the needs of the fire service in Neptune Township. The internal evaluation should include station utilization, future capital improvements, consolidation opportunities, ADA compliance, and long-term service delivery.
- Establish minimum staffing objectives, career staffing projections, volunteer utilization, duty crew staffing, succession planning, and long-term cost projections.
- Conduct an annual review of the duty crew program measuring response performance, staffing reliability, costs, participation, and operational effectiveness.
- Create a written recruitment and retention plan that includes public outreach, junior firefighter programs, educational partnerships, social media, employer engagement, and exit interviews.
- Develop a 10-year apparatus replacement and reserve plan aligned with staffing and operational needs.
- Evaluate station utilization, future capital improvements, consolidation opportunities, ADA compliance, and long-term service delivery.

## **Adopt a Five-Year Strategic Plan**

- Develop and annually review a strategic plan addressing staffing, deployment, recruitment and retention, capital improvements, fleet replacement, facility utilization, financial sustainability, mutual aid, and measurable performance objectives.
- Update the community risk assessment every five years to account for development, demographics, special hazards, climate impacts, and service demand.
- Publish an annual report summarizing performance, staffing, response metrics, financial status, strategic accomplishments, and future priorities.
- Create a living implementation matrix assigning each recommendation a priority, responsible party, timeline, and status update.
- The Fire District should establish a formal performance measurement program utilizing response time analysis, staffing reliability, volunteer participation, apparatus utilization, and financial metrics to guide future operational decisions. The review shall be in accordance with NFPA 1710 / 1720 to ensure industry standards are met, and if additional improvements are required, adjustments to staffing and deployment are made.

## Implementation Matrix

| Recommendation               | Priority | Responsible Party  | Timeline  |
|------------------------------|----------|--------------------|-----------|
| Strategic Steering Committee | High     | Fire Commissioners | 90 Days   |
| Strategic Plan               | High     | Steering Committee | 12 Months |
| Staffing Plan                | High     | Fire Chief         | 6 Months  |
| Performance Dashboard        | High     | Administration     | Quarterly |
| Fleet Master Plan            | Medium   | District Engineer  | 12 Months |
| Facility Master Plan         | Medium   | Steering Committee | 18 Months |
| Recruitment Plan             | High     | Fire Chief         | 6 Months  |
| Financial Plan               | High     | Commissioners      | Annual    |
| Organizational Study         | High     | Steering Committee | 18 Months |

## Additional Staffing Considerations

### OPTION 1 – Maintain current structure with expanded career staffing

#### Operational Benefit:

- Improves staffing reliability and daytime response capability
- Reduces immediate staffing shortages
- Enhances compliance with operational safety standards

#### Financial Impact:

- Significantly increases long-term personnel costs, including increased pension, healthcare, overtime, and employment liabilities
- Continued duplication of facilities and organizational structure

#### Assessment:

This option offers short-term stability but does not address structural deficiencies or long-term sustainability concerns.

### OPTION 2 – Consolidation and resource alignment

#### Pros:

- Consolidation of staffing and deployment
- Improved apparatus utilization and staffing response

- Reduced duplication of services and facilities
- Enhanced district-wide response coordination
- Reduced the footprint of operations
- Additional career staff to become NFPA 1710/1720 compliant

#### **Financial Impact**

- Long-term cost savings and cost avoidance
- Reduced impact of operational services
- Reduced use of underutilized assets
- Improved alignment between budget expenditures and operational capability

#### **Assessment:**

This option requires significant organizational change but offers the greatest potential for long-term operational and financial sustainability.

### **OPTION 3 – Regionalization/Shared Services Expansion**

#### **Municipal Considerations: Neptune Fire District #2 (Ocean Grove), or Bradley Beach**

#### **Operational Benefit:**

- Increased staffing and regional response capacity
- Improved command structure and operational coverage
- Expanded access to specialized resources

#### **Financial Impact:**

- Shared operational costs among participating agencies
- Potential reduction in administrative and staffing duplication
- Will require long-term fiscal planning and regulatory review

#### **Assessment:**

Regionalization may improve operational efficiency but would require significant coordination, governance planning, and stakeholder cooperation.

## **Final Closing Statement**

The Fire District has a long-standing history of dedicated service to the residents and visitors of Neptune Township. The volunteer firefighters, career personnel, officers, and Fire Commissioners who have served this community over the years have built a proud tradition of protecting life and property under increasingly difficult conditions.

This report addresses the current fire service environment that has fundamentally changed. It is not intended to diminish or devalue the historical integrity of past volunteer contributions, career fire service initiatives, or suggest failure. . The challenges facing the Fire District reflect current wide-ranging trends that must be addressed, including declining volunteer participation, greater operational complexity, additional regulations, and increasing financial pressures.

The current structure is under constant strain, with many of the concerns identified in the 1998 Neptune Fire District Assessment Report still present. While adaptive measures have been implemented, they alone do not fully address the long-term operational and financial sustainability challenges present in today's environment. Decisions made now will shape fire protection in Neptune Township for decades. Any transition to new fire services will require careful planning, strong leadership, open communication, and cooperation among all stakeholders.

The future success of the Fire District and public safety should focus on delivering safe, reliable, and sustainable fire protection rather than preserving historical boundaries or company identities. The Fire District must consider a consolidated, unified, and efficient organization that prioritizes firefighters and public safety. While the challenges are significant, they present an opportunity to modernize the Fire District and prepare for future success. With collaboration, strategic planning, and a commitment to public safety, the Fire District can continue to provide effective fire protection while adapting to modern realities. Resources are available to assist the Township of Neptune Fire District in planning or implementing the recommended options through the Department of Community Affairs, Division of Local Government Services.