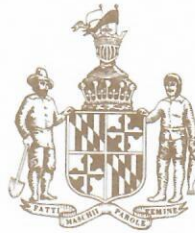


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As a member of a local volunteer fire department, I have seen firsthand how important it is to support the safety of our communities. First responders need our full and committed support. For all the sacrifices that are made by the men and women that form all our volunteer fire departments, I aim to reduce their expenses by proposing a property tax exemption on the additional lands owned by volunteer fire and rescue companies for fire and rescue related activities. These additional properties include prospective future firehouse sites and land used for other training and fire related services.

Looking at the financials comparing a volunteer fire station's budget to a typical career house, the numbers are stark. Baltimore County gave a total financial support of \$241,758 in FY22 to Middle River Volunteer Fire & Rescue Company (MRVFR) to help cover operational expenses. This number is a rough annual average for the other 28 volunteer stations across the County. Remember, that the operational expenses in a fiscal year do not account for future development, planning, and capital expenses. Breaking even is not the goal. Volunteer fire companies seek to invest in new equipment, gear, and supplies. Middle River Volunteer Fire & Rescue Company had to spend \$80,000 recently to put a unit back into service, repairs like these aren't always projected in the annual budget. Also, many companies are hoping to invest in future firehouses, or simply just be able to maintain their fleets when needed. As a result, what they must do is fundraise endlessly. I have reviewed MRVFR's FY22 Profit & Loss sheet. It lists income from a Bull Roast, Boot Drive, Christmas Fund, Fall Fund, Spring Fund, and additional donations, and events. That is a busy fundraising calendar on top of the real work of emergency responses. This amount of work often necessitates hiring a full-time development director for a typical non-profit. These firefighters shouldn't be fundraising to pay for property taxes on lands used for fire and rescue services. They should be fundraising for new equipment, gear, or improvements to the station. These are the types of line items on the expense sheet that ultimately benefit the citizens of Baltimore County - the tools necessary to engage in life-saving activities.

It is instructive to compare volunteer firehouse and the career fire departments numbers in Baltimore County's FY23 proposed budget. The FY23 budget totals \$121.5 million for the fire department. Out of that \$121.5 million, only \$10.7 million, is contributed to volunteer fire companies. So, to calculate on average, the 25 career stations will cost approximately \$4.4 million each in FY23 to operate and are fully funded by the County. That is a far cry from the \$241,000 given to help cover Middle River's FY22 operating expenses. So then, a volunteer station on average costs the taxpayers 5% of a typical career station in Baltimore County - \$241,000 vs. \$4.4 million. To acknowledge the cost-savings that the 29 volunteer companies give to Baltimore County as a whole, this legislation is critical.

This is in no way meant to reflect negatively on the valuable and necessary work of our career fire service, but rather to highlight the significant financial value volunteer departments offer Baltimore County. This tax credit will incentivize these much-needed volunteer organizations to continue their good work that provides an invaluable service to the community and a significant cost-savings to Baltimore County. By not allowing this credit, we are only disincentivizing volunteer companies to make future improvements upon their facilities or properly maintain properties that often provide valuable and much needed open space to many communities. Supporters of this legislation include the Baltimore County Volunteer Firefighters Association, the Baltimore County Executive, the entire Baltimore County Council, and the Baltimore County House Delegation. Even the leadership of volunteer fire companies that would not be receiving this credit because it does not apply to their properties, such as White Marsh Volunteer Fire Company, Long Green Volunteer Fire Company, and Liberty Road Volunteer Fire Company, are united in support of this legislation. I urge a favorable report of this bill to greatly benefit these volunteer fire companies that will benefit significantly from this cost-savings in their annual budgets. Allow them to focus on saving lives rather than additional fundraising demands.

Raja Nawrothi