

Future of Fire Committee  
Bellevue Borough  
March 28, 2023

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Summary: This Committee was formed as an ad-hoc Committee by President Cerminara in the summer of 2022 to explore the relationship between Columbia Hose, Hook, and Ladder (CHHL) and the Fire Department of the Borough of Bellevue, and with the Borough itself. The goal of the Committee's work has been to promote the safety of our residents and our first responders while also protecting the Borough's assets.

After many months, and having gone through years of data, communications, and reports, the Committee recommends to Bellevue Borough Council that we vote to decertify Columbia Hose Hook and Ladder, effective immediately, at our March 28, 2023 Council meeting. The following report will highlight some of the findings of the Committee and some of the reasoning behind the decision to separate the Borough and Columbia Hose Hook and Ladder in the short term, and to move in the direction of a more robust paid fire service with the addition of hired professional Fire Chief to oversee the department. In the interim, and until a paid Chief is hired and our personnel code is revised to include the same, Bellevue will rely on the City of Pittsburgh's Bureau of Fire for automatic aid and recognize the most senior Lieutenant, Lt. Hartman, as the acting Chief.

In the long term, we hope to see a collaborative effort to establish a more modern career and volunteer approach to fire service in the Borough.

The urgency of this vote is driven by a few major factors that the Committee has identified as potential liabilities to the Borough and its residents. At this time, we believe that the working relationship between the Borough and CHHL has deteriorated to the point that the safety of our residents and their tax dollars are compromised. The Borough has no oversight or input into decisions made by this organization and we find that our respective visions for fire safety in the Borough are at odds. We find that the Borough's assets, both physical and financial, are at risk of being exploited by future planning that is not right sized for our needs, and doesn't involve the Borough in decision making. As CHHL has already misrepresented the Borough's position to the State of Pennsylvania, about a merger that they did not inform us of despite their decision over a year ago, we believe that immediate action is imperative to pause any action that Council has not had a chance to consider or weigh in on. We are also asking Council to consider the safety of our residents first and foremost at this time and in all future decision making.

### **Strategic Planning**

On or around the week of March 20, 2023, the Borough was notified of a petition filed in the Court of Common Pleas to approve a merger with Ben Avon's now decertified volunteer outfit, without objection of either Borough. It appears that CHHL formally voted to merge with the Ben Avon Volunteer Fire Company in January 2022 without prior notice or input from Council, without giving each Borough the chance to object, and filing the petition stating that there were no objections. This is an egregious violation of trust, and a prime

example of how the Borough is not properly consulted on or permitted to exercise any management of our fire safety needs. When CHHL attempted to interrupt the purchase of needed rescue tools, it was repeated several times that CHHL had inherited rescue tools from Ben Avon that Bellevue could use, but they couldn't be handed over or used until they were "released from the State". When asked for clarification at the time, nobody could or would explain exactly what that meant, and the Borough moved forward with the budgeted purchase of rescue tools. It is now clear that CHHL acted independently to merge with another company, and the letter we received confirms what the need for "waiting on the State" was in reference to. It would also appear that we have absorbed volunteers from Ben Avon over the last year, but since we do not have access to membership rolls, we have little idea who represents our Borough on emergency calls.

Because we have no ability to oversee or offer direction to the future of CHHL's own organizational plans, we feel that the Borough is left with little choice but to accept what CHHL expects to be able to do, even if it is not in accordance with best practices or standards for our Borough. It has also recently come to the attention of the Committee that CHHL has been in the initial planning stages of organizing a combined volunteer department to serve all of the North Boroughs. Municipal officials from Emsworth Borough called a meeting in February of 2023 to bring together elected officials from across the Boroughs and members of several companies who are planning the merger. It would seem that these outside agencies intend to force the adjoining municipalities to accept the services they propose without the communities being able to perform any type of needs assessment or strategic planning to inform decisions about public safety.

- The Borough of Ben Avon decertified the Ben Avon Volunteer Fire Company in 2021, due to the company's refusal to sign a contract with the Borough or a lease for the firehouse space used by the volunteer company. None of the issues with the relationship between CHHL and Bellevue Borough are unique to our community. Companies all over the State are facing issues such as this in dealing with organizations that act as outside contractors for fire services.
- With this new information, it makes clear that when CHHL is requesting our assistance to buy a new truck or other equipment, they do not take the Borough's position into account. If there is a plan to consolidate volunteer fire companies, then the costs associated should also be spread across the Boroughs. We feel that this is intentionally misleading the public as they make a case for the need for new equipment without being transparent about the potential use.
- When asked about plans for funding the new company, or how each Borough would manage their stations and resources, it was proposed that the new volunteer company would eventually discontinue fundraising and instead require each Borough to impose a new tax to fund one large department. There appeared to be no belief that any or all of the Boroughs could refuse to participate or that any or all Councils may not vote to raise taxes. Though the merger is admittedly in early planning stages, it didn't inspire confidence in the plans among representatives from the involved Boroughs.
- There were also assertions made at this meeting that the volunteers could "skimp" on training if the State or municipalities would stop "shoving it down their throats" because volunteers "don't have time" for the training (in regards to the most basic FF1 training). The training required for Volunteer Firefighters in the State of Pennsylvania is different from the qualifications one needs to be a professional firefighter. At this time, the Borough is seeking a candidate to fill a full time, professional firefighter position, and the training and certifications held by most volunteers leave them ineligible for employment with us. The goal of this Committee and Council's Public Safety Committee is to ensure

the safety of all of our residents, and we cannot do that by accepting lower standards in regards to training and preparedness. Bellevue Borough is the only Borough of those involved in the proposed merger that has career firefighters and it remains unclear how that would affect the relationship or cost relative to the other Boroughs.

### **Accountability**

There is currently no structure, agreement, or contract in place between the Borough of Bellevue and Columbia Hose, Hook, and Ladder. CHHL operates as an independent nonprofit bearing a 501c4 designation. The Borough of Bellevue has no oversight regarding the structure of the department, their financial status, or the comings and goings of each volunteer. We have no control over the recruitment, training, or retention of volunteers, or governance of their behavior while representing the Borough of Bellevue, both within and outside of our community. CHHL serves the Borough at the pleasure of Council, based on handshake agreements from decades past. This has led to many problems between the two departments and several management conflicts throughout the years.

- When asked repeatedly by this Council and prior elected officials to release documents to the Borough, including organizational bylaws, financial statements, member rosters, certifications for each member, and other documents, we've been met with refusal or stalling. At this time the Borough has no current or working by-laws for CHHL and only the barest minimum of financial information, provided well after the 2022 Budget Workshops, and after the Borough's Budget was approved by Council.
- They instead misled Council and our Borough's stakeholders by repeatedly asking for \$60k for a new truck and to detract from the Borough's need for its own rescue tools.  
There is no written agreement governing the use of space or shared equipment by CHHL. Their use of the Borough's garage and fire quarters is rent-free, and they have taken it upon themselves to make modifications to the space without permission, with no concern for the Borough's budgeted and planned use of the same space.
- The Public Safety Committee does not receive regular reports from CHHL, and although the reports received from the Borough's own firefighter are well done and include pertinent information, they are frequently criticized by CHHL leadership. We have observed evidence of misuse of resources by CHHL, including the unauthorized use of gas owned by the Borough. Having been caught in the act, the Borough was quickly reimbursed, but Council has no real knowledge of how often this may happen or has happened in the past.
- The Committee will also note that it would appear that CHHL has potentially violated the terms of its own 501c4 nonprofit status in at least one incident that we can identify. It seems evident that there is not enough internal knowledge of how a nonprofit operates or what standards they are held to outside of first responder activities or for them to operate lawfully and as representatives of Bellevue Borough. CHHL has continued to operate their QRS service without permission from the Borough, and at different times without a license or the support of governing agencies, and in conflict with the rules of the program. This is considered self-dispatching, which again the Borough has no control over, and which has been a point of contention between the Borough, the County, contracted EMS providers, Allegheny Health Network, and CHHL for years.  
Council has access to records of and knowledge of past Councilpersons attempting to work with CHHL on their budget, including the former Chair of Public Safety. At that time, it was recommended by

Councilperson Anya Pikul, herself an accounting professional, that the organization begin to get their finances in order by having an outside audit performed so they could provide the Borough with correct and up-to-date budget information. Instead, we recently received the same numbers from the same year of Councilperson Pikul's exploration (2018) with no mistakes corrected or accounted for. The records for the subsequent years are as problematic as the earlier ones, and no attempt has been made on the part of CHHL to keep better records or to report income and expenses in accordance with the governance of their nonprofit status.

### **Volunteerism**

As volunteerism dies out across the nation in general, and particularly within the State of Pennsylvania, fire departments and volunteer companies have struggled to recruit new, active members to respond to the volumes and types of calls that are received. Fire companies are spread thin as they become more akin to "All-Hazard" companies, responsible for a multitude of tasks beyond firefighting. The State of Pennsylvania has relied too heavily on volunteer participation for decades, mostly to save on the costs associated with managing a fire service, and this model is currently in crisis in regards to funding and volunteer participation. The Committee recognizes that while our volunteers are appreciated for their time and service, we are doing a disservice to our community by relying on skeleton crews to respond to calls. As noted in monthly reports, the department averages about one volunteer responder per call, often leaving our paid firefighters to arrive on scene alone or to enter a building alone.

- It was noted in February of 2023, by the Chief of CHHL, that the Borough's firefighters had recently needed to call 8 different companies to get 14 firefighters on scene.
- In 2020, during a structure fire on Grant Ave, 40-50 departments were called for mutual aid because so many companies sent a driver who was not qualified to fight fires, and the Assistant Chief had to keep calling other companies, possibly losing valuable time, and depriving other municipalities of staff and equipment. It is clear that relying on mutual aid companies brings more trucks to Bellevue but not the personnel necessary to fight fires.
- Partnering with the Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire for automatic aid would put 4 engines, 2 trucks, 24 firefighters, and 2 Battalion Chiefs on the scene in a few minutes at first alarm, with 8 more firefighters and 2 more engines arriving with a second alarm. The Committee sees this as an advantage to the current system of one person arriving from each of several mutual aid companies from outside the Borough.

### **Personnel**

It has become increasingly difficult for the Borough and its leadership to manage the relationship between CHHL and our own Fire Department. The Borough is inclined to follow all policies and procedures for firefighters and their departments as governed by the State, the County, and other accredited organizations. This is frequently at odds with the plans or actions of CHHL, and leads to misinformation and mischaracterization of the Borough's paid and contracted fire professionals. Human resources complaints and situations of this nature must be discussed in an Executive Session and details have not been included in this report.

- Bellevue's paid department is managed by the DAS, under the direction of Bellevue Borough Council. When these professionals come into work they are being asked to defer to the Volunteer Chief on scene, or to the hierarchy of the CHHL department despite being paid professional employees working under contract and for compensation. We feel that this is an unacceptable standard of employment for those the Borough has hired and invested in..
- A recent example that played out publicly revolves around the SCBA training required by the State. The training as conducted by CHHL was in clear violation of the contract that our paid firefighters are party to and as such, the paid firefighters would complete the training separately from CHHL. CHHL then took to social media to accuse the Borough's paid staff of refusing to participate. This is evidence of the type of behavior used by CHHL to denigrate the paid staff of the Bellevue Fire Department, Administrative Services, and Council, and to sow mistrust throughout the community they serve.

In conclusion, it is the recommendation of this Committee to Bellevue Borough Council that we vote to decertify Columbia Hose Hook and Ladder, effective immediately at our March 28, 2023 Council meeting, and to recognize Lt. Hartman as the acting Fire Chief of the Borough of Bellevue's Fire Service. This decision was arrived at after much careful research, consulting with fire service professionals and other organizations who have done extensive studies on issues such as these. We are grateful to all current and former volunteer firefighters who have served in our community, and we admire the commitment and dedication it takes to devote oneself to volunteer firefighting. However, the Committee has determined that the Borough's and CHHL's plans for the future of firefighting in Bellevue are not compatible with the desired outcome for the residents of Bellevue.

#### Acknowledgements and Sources

- University of Pittsburgh; CONNECT, Future of Fire Committee Reports  
 Building Collaborative Capacity - 2022 Needs Assessment (Fall 2022)  
 Developing Collaborative Capacity to Enhance Municipal-Level Fire Services in Allegheny County (GSPIA/CONNECT Capstone, Fall 2020)  
 Addressing the Volunteer Firefighter Crisis (GSPIA/CONNECT Capstone, Spring 2019)
- Pennsylvania Senate Resolution 60, 2018 Annual Report  
<http://pehsc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/SR-6-REPORT-FINAL.pdf>