



# Borough Of Bellevue

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March 29, 2023

## An Open Letter to Residents and Property Owners of the Borough of Bellevue

Dear Residents and Property Owners:

You may have recently heard that the Borough Council voted to decertify Columbia Hose Hook and Ladder Company. The decision was reached after much research, discussion, and consideration by the ad hoc Future of Fire Committee; members include Jodi Cerminara, Jennie Denton, Tom Hrynda, and Amanda Sloane. Their report and recommendation was presented to Council, who voted for the decertification at the March 28, 2023 Council Meeting.

The Borough has long been served by 2 distinct fire services: the Bellevue Fire Department, consisting of 3 career firefighters and 4 paid part-time firefighters; and Columbia Hose Hook & Ladder, whose members are volunteers. While many municipalities have a similar hybrid or combination set up, Bellevue's is unique in that the Fire Chief is also a volunteer. This means that the career firefighters are under the supervision of the Director of Administrative Services except when on the scene of a fire, when they take direction from the volunteer Fire Chief. This can pose significant complications as the career firefighters generally have more training and hold more certifications than the volunteers. Bellevue is the only municipality in PA with this arrangement - in other municipalities with combination fire departments, the Fire Chief is a paid employee, which gives the municipality operational control over their Fire Department.

Because of the unusual structure and some of the associated issues, the Borough had 2 independent studies completed many years ago in hopes of addressing those issues. The "Peer-to-Peer Assessment Report of the Delivery of Fire & Emergency Services in the Borough of Bellevue" was done more than 20 years ago and the report was released in January 2002. Under "Findings & Recommendations", the report noted that:

"It is apparent and visible that the delivery of fire services, including assignment of responsibility, liability exposure, apparatus maintenance, departmental control and answerability is not in keeping with progressive fire department management techniques or efficient fire service protection as related to the existing delivery of fire and emergency services within the Borough of Bellevue."

In the time since the report was presented, the same challenges and issues that were identified have continued to impact the delivery of fire services in the Borough, and have been exacerbated by the declining numbers of volunteer fire fighters. This is a reality faced by nearly all volunteer fire departments in Pennsylvania. The PA Fire and Emergency

Services Institute has estimated that the number of firefighters dropped from 300,000 in the 1980s to 38,000 in 2019, a nearly 88% decrease!

Bellevue's Council is charged with providing fire safety services for residents and businesses, and it has become increasingly clear that Columbia Hose Hook & Ladder does not have the staffing capacity to provide adequate services. In 2022, 37% of calls were handled by 2 or fewer total responders (including both career and volunteer firefighters) and more than half were handled by 3 or fewer responders (again, including both career and volunteer firefighters). Of the 33 volunteer fire fighters on the roster in 2022, 9 responded to fewer than 2% of the 610 incidents. Only 1 volunteer responded to 50% or more of the calls, and the Fire Chief responded to only 15% of the calls. While no one is blaming volunteer firefighters, who often have full time jobs, families, and other responsibilities, these statistics are offered to demonstrate the need for a more viable long-term solution, and it is Council's belief that a modified structure will enable Bellevue to provide more effective fires services to residents and business owners.

What will happen without a volunteer department in Bellevue? Effectively immediately, Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire (PBF) will provide "Automatic Aid" to the Borough at no cost. Bellevue Fire Department career firefighters will continue to respond to non-structure fire incidents and request mutual aid as necessary. In the event of a structure fire, which represented less than 11% of the total calls for service in 2022, PBF will also receive the call and will respond to the scene, generally from their station in Brighton Heights, with 4 engines, 2 trucks, 2 Battalion Chiefs, and 24 professional firefighters to work with Bellevue's career firefighters. This response will provide a faster, more effective response to structural fires. PBF has confirmed that it will provide this service as long as needed, giving Council an opportunity review and further address Community Risk Reduction and how fire safety services can be provided most effectively and efficiently in the Borough.

One immediate benefit residents may experience is from the improvement in the Borough's ISO rating. The Insurance Service Office (ISO) issues a score that reflects how prepared a community is for fires. The scale runs from 1 to 10, with lower scores indicating better preparedness. This score may have a positive impact on the insurance premiums of property owners in the Borough. The Borough's current score is 4, and with automatic aid provide by the PBF, that score could go down to 2, reflecting the more robust response to fire calls.

If you have any questions regarding this matter, please contact the Borough DAS, Cindy Bahn, at 412/766.6164 or [manager@bellevueboro.com](mailto:manager@bellevueboro.com), or any member of Council; please contact the Administrative Office at the above number for the contact information for members of Council.

Sincerely,



Jodi Cerminara, President  
Bellevue Borough Council