

## MIDDLETOWN

## Marshal suggests volunteer stipends

*Fire companies in Bensalem and Warrington already offer small stipends to their active volunteers.*

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STAFF WRITER

A little cash for volunteer firefighters and emergency medical technicians would be a good use for some of Middletown's next casino grant, the township's fire marshal and emergency management coordinator said.

Jim McGuire has proposed paying firefighters in the four companies that serve Middletown \$5 per call or training event up to a maximum of \$599 a year. In addition to the stipend, each fire department would identify the top five responders each month and \$25 gas cards would be issued to them, excluding those using department vehicles.

The Langhorne-Middletown, Pennel, Parkland and William Penn Fire Companies are part of the Skyline Fire District that serves Middletown.

Under McGuire's proposal, volunteer EMTs would get \$2 per hour on duty or training after their first 24 hours of service, up to \$599 for the year. He estimates the total cost of his suggested program for firefighters and EMTs at \$97,350.

McGuire, who is also a volunteer firefighter for the Lower Southampton Fire Company, said he got the idea from a document called SR60, a study of the Pennsylvania fire service.

"Currently, the fire and emergency medical services both have volunteers and there needs to be something other than the good feeling they get to bring in and keep these critical resources," he said. "A recent study showed that, on a national average, for every five new recruits brought into the volunteer fire service, only one stays around long term."

In addition to the stipends, McGuire also has suggested using some of the casino grant for \$89,295 worth of emergency services equipment, including generators to keep traffic lights working during power outages, portable stop signs, GPS units and much more.

The supervisors and Middletown's grant applications writer, Lori Thompson, will consider the suggestion as they prepare an application for the next casino grant. The program uses money from Philadelphia Park Casino in Bensalem and is administered by the Redevelopment Authority of the County of Bucks. Awards are given to the county, Bensalem and the municipalities that border Bensalem, which are Middletown, Bristol Township, Hulmeville and Lower Southampton.

Regardless of whether McGuire's proposals end up being funded by a casino grant, they are worthy ideas, said Middletown Supervisor Chuck Thompson. If the casino grant doesn't work out, McGuire said he would continue looking for other grants or ways to finance volunteer firefighter and EMT stipends.

"These people do it all for free and it's getting more difficult to get and keep firefighters," Thompson said. "Something like this might help us attract more and keep those we have."

Supervisors Chairman Robert McMonagle said he wants to know more about McGuire's proposals.

"One danger with paying people out of a grant is you lock yourself in and then you don't know how long the grant will last," McMonagle said. "It might be gone after the first year and then what do you do?"

Thompson, a grants specialist with the engineering firm CMX, said there should be between \$2.5 million and \$2.9 million in casino grants available this year. The grant applications are due by Sept. 30 and awards should be announced on or about Oct. 31, she said.

Last year, Middletown got an \$800,000 casino grant, the largest one awarded. It is being used for a renovation and expansion of the William Penn Fire Company station on Bristol Oxford Valley Road.

Some towns in Bucks County already offer incentives to firefighters. Bensalem pays active

volunteer firefighters \$500 a year, and the Warrington Fire Company pays \$5 a call.

There's also legislation being considered in Harrisburg that would offer a \$500 tax credit for active volunteers in ambulance and fire companies, allow volunteers to apply for as much as 50 percent tuition reimbursement at any state-related university or community college, and allow businesses that employ volunteer firefighters to apply for tax credits.