

Rep. Tom Tangretti
Firefighters Banquet Remarks
April 6, 2002

Thank you for the invitation to be here with you tonight.

It is an honor for me, and a chance for me also, on behalf of all the residents of the Greensburg area and the state of Pennsylvania, to once again thank you and honor you for what you do to protect and serve your communities.

You know, for the past several years, it has been one of my legislative priorities to revitalize those communities, to bring them to life once again economically and socially.

Most of us in my generation remember the days when people lived in town, walked to work and to school, and sat on their front porches at night and discussed the issues of the day with their neighbors.

Our communities may not have been better in those days – I suppose it would depend on your

interpretation of better – but they certainly seemed more cohesive and more solid.

It's my belief that one of the ways to improve the future of our neighborhoods is to bring back some of the elements that made our communities so strong in the past.

And one of those is, quite simply, people.

We must bring people back to our older residential neighborhoods to live, and to our older downtown business districts to work and do business.

As I said, I've spent the last several years trying to do this, and during my efforts, I've discovered something very important – you can't just ask people to come back to deteriorating neighborhoods and blighted business districts, and expect them to do so.

You need make it possible for them to be successful.

That's why I'm advocating state initiatives that would give people tax incentives for returning to historic neighborhoods and business districts to live and work, and for revitalizing and reinvigorating these areas, and bringing them back to life – both economically and socially.

I believe this can happen – but it's going to take a commitment from people and from government.

I decided to begin my remarks tonight by telling you about my initiative for a couple of reasons.

One of them is, quite frankly, that I'm proud of it, and rarely get tired of talking about it.

I believe it can work – it has in other places in the country.

Unfortunately, Pennsylvania is a state that, so far, has not embraced this strategy on a statewide basis.

I believe it should.

But the other reason I mention it is because it ties in well with another point I'd like to make here tonight – I point I've already stated:

You can't just ask people to do something and then expect them to do it – you have to make it possible for them to be successful.

Just as Pennsylvania grew on the foundation of strong, vibrant communities, those communities – at least the vast majority of them – were protected by strong, vibrant volunteer fire departments.

Organized, volunteer fire protection in the United States was born right here in Pennsylvania, and for more than 200 years was nurtured by the people in each community, who volunteered to serve and provided the funding necessary to keep volunteer fire departments healthy.

Unfortunately, as we entered the 21st century, many volunteer fire departments, like many of the

smaller, older communities they served, were in trouble.

It's intriguing how similar the problems are that these communities and fire departments face.

They're both losing people.

There are people that are as dedicated to our volunteer fire departments as there are people who are dedicated to our older communities.

Unfortunately, an increasing number of these dedicated people are finding it harder and harder to succeed – they are increasingly being asked to do more with less and to sacrifice more of their time with their families, their energy and their money, for a cause which those in higher places seem to value less – in action if not in words.

In 2001, two things happened in Pennsylvania to drive this point home, and to bring the plight, and importance, of this state's firefighters – both volunteer and paid – to everyone's attention.

First, 2001 was the year in which volunteer fire departments in Pennsylvania lost a critical funding source that they had gained just the year before.

Legislators from across Pennsylvania fought hard two years ago to create a \$25 million grant program for volunteer fire departments in Pennsylvania, and had succeeded in convincing then-Governor Ridge to include that money in his budget.

Furthermore, we argued that that funding source should become permanent in Pennsylvania, and that other incentives for local volunteer fire departments and firefighters should be added – helping fire departments with insurance costs; providing pension benefits to volunteer firefighters; allowing students taking firefighter training classes in high school to earn credits for those classes; and providing tuition breaks for volunteer firefighters.

Those ideas were rejected, and to our disappointment, so was the funding for volunteer fire departments last year.

Then came the second event – September 11th – the event that forever erased any doubts about the important role that all of our emergency responders play – firefighters, police officers, doctors, EMTs, etc.

September 11th, along with the struggles that our local fire departments have experienced since the state funding was withdrawn, both have brought renewed focus in Harrisburg on our volunteer fire departments.

There is a renewed push to help our volunteer fire departments financially and in other ways.

September 11th forced us to go back and look at what we ask of our volunteer firefighters, and what we get from them in return.

When we do that, we have no choice but to recognize that, compared to some of the other investments Pennsylvania makes with its people's

tax dollars, volunteer firefighters and fire departments are an incredible bargain.

In the majority of communities in Pennsylvania, volunteer firefighters and EMTs are the first line of defense not just against fires, but also in medical emergencies, hazardous materials incidents, water rescues, natural disasters and – as we are all more aware of now – potential terrorist incidents.

Providing these services costs volunteer fire departments nationwide about \$37 billion a year – about \$6 billion right here in Pennsylvania.

Let me state that another way: By providing these services on a volunteer basis, volunteer fire departments and rescue squads **SAVE** Pennsylvania taxpayers about \$6 billion a year in local taxes and insurance costs.

This year, we are asking for a \$45 million grant program in the state budget for fire departments in Pennsylvania.

We all know that it is going to be a very difficult budget year in Harrisburg.

Instead of asking where we can invest money this year, we are arguing over where we can save it.

Instead of asking who we can provide funding to, we are arguing over whom we must take it from.

Still, \$45 million to ensure the continuation of \$6 billion worth of service seems like an incredible bargain to me and for many other lawmakers in Harrisburg, from both political parties.

We will continue to push for these grants, and for other benefits that will help you turn more of your attention to fighting fires and recruiting, training and retaining firefighters and EMTs, and less on calling bingo and barbecuing chicken.

I realize that fund-raising will always be an important part of volunteer firefighting, and I believe our volunteers enter into service knowing that, and accepting it.

But today, the fund-raising pressure on volunteer fire departments and individual firefighters is becoming overwhelming.

Pennsylvania is losing firefighters, and potentially could lose entire fire departments, because of it.

This at a time when the number of emergency calls continues to increase. We can only ask our volunteers to do more with less for so long.

At some point, we must make the commitment to help, a commitment that at least matches the commitment these volunteers have made to us.

There is no national or state statistic available that gives us the average amount of time that a volunteer firefighter gives to his or her community.

However, each one of our volunteers knows what that number is, and for the rest of us, it should not be too hard to figure out.

When you consider not just responding to fires and other emergencies at a moment's notice, but also fund-raising, equipment maintenance, station maintenance, training and administrative duties, volunteer firefighting no doubt is one of the most demanding volunteer activities today, and volunteer firefighters must be counted among our most committed volunteers.

The speeches of praise and resolutions of support for our firefighters that have come since September 11th are well deserved, and I'm sure appreciated.

But we must offer something tangible, as well.

The calls for the days of community schools, downtown businesses, mom-and-pop stores, safe streets and community pride are valid too, but something tangible must be done to make these things happen, to bring them about once again.

Our local communities, and our local volunteer fire departments, both demand and deserve more attention from state leaders.

Local officials and have done an admirable job just to make sure some of our older communities and towns still exist, and local volunteer firefighters have done way more than their fair share to ensure that fire protection and rescue services still exist in these towns.

Financial and social realities are different today than they were 50 years ago. Community leaders and volunteer firefighters are forced to do more.

They need help, and they deserve help – at the very least a generous financial push – from the state.

I will continue fighting to provide that help, keeping in mind all the things my family and I, and all my constituents, receive in return.

Thank you.

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