

## Guest column: New fire territory will provide necessary services

Guest column | Posted: Wednesday, March 9, 2016 6:42 am

*This guest column was written by Kim Alexander, president of the Bloomington Township Board.*

Last November, the trustees and boards of Bloomington, Benton and Washington townships, as well as a few residents, met to begin to explore the possibility of creating a fire territory that would serve the residents of these three townships in the unincorporated areas. These meetings occurred after years of informal discussions regarding the future of funding fire and emergency services. The need to secure a sustainable stream of revenue to support these needs is noted in the Bloomington Township Fire Department's 2013-2018 Master Plan.

Benton and Washington Townships currently have contracts with Bloomington Township for fire and emergency medical services. Their contractual fees are much less than the actual costs to Bloomington Township for providing these services. But under the current tax rates, Benton and Washington Townships are very restricted in their ability to raise sufficient tax revenues to cover their fair share of these costs. A fire territory is a funding mechanism that the state has provided to address this problem. It is a funding mechanism that allows for a new maximum fire tax rate to be established when two or more contiguous political subdivisions come together to create a new, unified body. In order for a fire territory to be successful, all parties must enter into it in good faith, with a spirit of collaboration. A willingness to cooperate and work together is the thread that binds this agreement.

As is always the case when parties are trying to work together, differences may occur. Elected officials have a duty to exercise their best judgment in making these types of decisions. As negotiations between Benton, Washington and Bloomington townships continued, it became increasingly clear that Bloomington Township could not count on support from Benton Township to partner with us in good faith. With the real prospect of the proposal to create a fire territory this year failing in the eleventh hour, with serious disagreement over the structure, power and authority of the executive committee that would make recommendations on the territory's budget, and with the expressed threat of dissolution after the first year of operation of the fire territory if it did pass, the Bloomington Township Board and I made the very difficult decision to move forward with only a two-township fire territory. We could not do otherwise and fulfill our obligation to make the best decision we could on behalf our constituents. We still have the opportunity to create a sustainable revenue stream that will benefit the residents of both remaining townships for years to come.

The current tax levy of the townships will not support the services that our residents need and

deserve. The fire territory will provide for a more equitable tax base and will allow the two townships to pool resources. And it will provide financing to enable us to install a fire station in Washington Township, something that is much needed because of the impact of I-69.

For now, we remain focused on creating a strong, equitable tax base to support a fire department that serves the fire and emergency services needs of the residents of the unincorporated parts of Bloomington Township and Washington Township. In the future, we would welcome Benton Township joining the fire territory if we can negotiate on mutually agreeable terms.