

New fire territory may not include Benton Township

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Bloomington Township board members are exploring the possibility of moving forward with plans for creating a fire territory for just two, instead of three, townships. Fearing the venture will fall apart days before an application deadline and citing hostility from one board member, Bloomington Township officials want to remove Benton Township's involvement from a proposed fire territory.

Township officials have a deadline of March 31 to submit an application for a proposed Northern Monroe County Fire Protection Territory to the state.

Bloomington Township, Washington Township and Benton Township officials still need to have two public hearings on the issue this month. Then, board members take a final vote on an interlocal agreement and resolution on March 29.

Consultant Paige Sansone, of Umbaugh and Associates, confirmed Monday evening that if a township does not vote in favor of joining the territory, the entire enterprise fails. They'd have to wait a year before applying again.

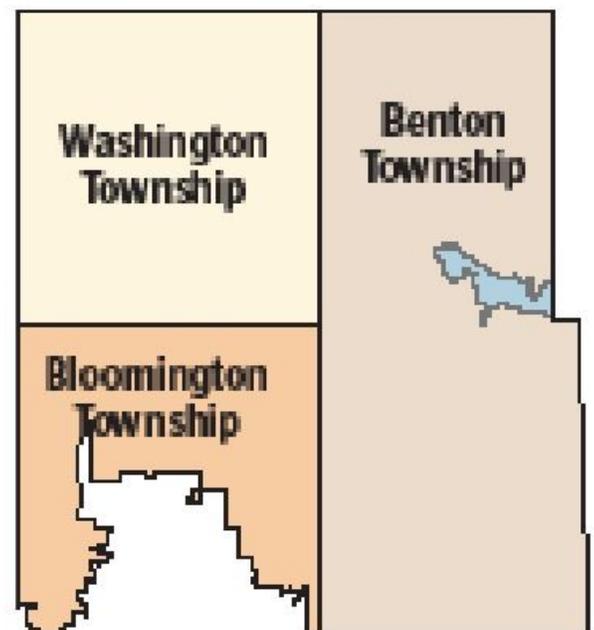
Benton Township, which has an all-volunteer fire department and a station in Unionville, and Washington Township, which doesn't have a fire department, both have contracts with Bloomington Township for their fire protection and emergency medical service needs. Officials have told their constituents the townships no longer have the tax bases to afford their fire contracts, and that forming a fire territory with Bloomington Township would solve immediate financial issues and create a sustainable department into the future.

A proposed fire territory would be funded by increases in property taxes in the three townships. In Bloomington Township, which is partly within the city limits and partly outside them, only the portions outside are affected.

Bloomington Township officials have also said they can no longer afford to offer discounted contract rates with Benton and Washington, and that each township needs to pay its fair share for fire protection.

Fire territory change?

A fire territory proposed for three Monroe County townships may be cut to just Washington Township and the unincorporated part of Bloomington Township, eliminating Benton.



HERALD-TIMES MAP

Fire district

H-T map

“Doing nothing cuts their service. We can’t afford to keep doing what we’re doing now with this level of funding,” board member Vic Kelson said Monday during Bloomington Township’s monthly board meeting. “There’s this perception that this whole thing is about Benton and Washington, and not about Bloomington. And that’s not the case at all.”

Benton board member Brian Crouch said last week that if his fellow board members vote to join the fire territory, his recommendation will be to withdraw after a year, claim the township’s portion of the tax levy and fund its own fire department.

Crouch also does not agree with Bloomington Township being named the “provider unit,” which is defined by state law as the unit that makes the financial decisions for the territory. He wants a nine-member executive board to make the financial decisions, which is not addressed in state code.

Bloomington Township board members Kelson, Kim Alexander and Barbara McKinney agreed they are uncomfortable going forward with plans for a fire territory with Benton Township.

Kelson said he did not feel hostility or distrust from the residents who attended last week’s public hearing in Benton Township. “But their board has a real issue,” he said. “One member who acts with hostility toward board members, specifically. We can’t run a fire department like that.”

Bloomington Township Trustee Lillian Henegar added, “To have that threat hanging over our heads.”

Alexander said she doesn’t want to voice both support and “grave reservations” for the proposed fire territory at the next two public hearings. “It’s too bad, the dynamics of the whole thing going forward. He’s only one person, and I hate for one person to derail it, but he’s caused so much chaos,” she said.

The group asked Sansone, who was on speaker phone, if a delay in the next public hearing and the publishing of an updated legal notice would meet the state’s legal requirements on deadline.

“I think that would be a possibility,” she said. Sansone wanted to verify that with officials from the Indiana Department of Local Government Finance. She also needed to refigure the financials for a proposed fire territory composed of only Bloomington Township and Washington Township.

“They are desperate to have this fire territory. They can’t do anything but this. They have their community behind them,” Henegar said of her conversations with Washington Township officials.

They tried to work things out with Benton, Henegar concluded. “At this point in time, it’s becoming abundantly clear that we can’t.”