

January 15, 2026 Special Meeting of the Board of Fire Commissioners

District #3 in the Township of Hanover

County of Morris, Cedar Knolls, New Jersey

Public Hearing

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 p.m. on January 15, 2026 in accordance with the Public Meeting Act of 1975, Chapter 231. The Board observed a moment of silence for all those who have given their lives in service of their communities and nation.

ATTENDANCE: Commissioners Mary Lou DeSimone, Michael Dugan Sr., Thomas Harrington, Robert Gallagher, and Gary Keyser were present.

Administrator Hark Jr., Asst. Chief McGuinness, and other District 3 staff and members of the public were also in attendance.

Opening of Public Hearing: Commissioner Keyser read the statement of purpose of the meeting informing the public the purpose of the meeting is to allow public commentary on the 2026 budget that was introduced on December 4, 2025. Commissioner Keyser thanked Administrator Hark Jr and Treasurer Michael Dugan for the time and effort put into the creation of the budget. Commissioner Keyser noted that this meeting is strictly to discuss the 2026 budget but if the public had any additional questions or concerns unrelated to the budget, the regular board meeting will be following the conclusion of the public hearing.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: Richard Wedemeyer asked about the billing structure the EMS Division. He stated it seems like Cedar Knolls residents pay for the “squad” but Whippany residents have “no financial stake in the game.” Commissioner Keyser stated that District 2 does not pay a EMS tax in their Fire District tax but are balance billed. Administrator Hark confirmed that it does not go to collections if not paid. Mr. Wedemeyer then asked what percentage of ambulance runs were District 2 based. Administrator Hark said over 50 percent. Mr. Wedemeyer asked what percentage of calls were residential vs commercial. He was informed that information was not readily available but will be posted on the website. A follow up question was asked about the differentiating tax rates between both districts. Commissioner Keyser explained the difference in ratables.

Mr. Wedemeyer asked if redistricting could be done so that tax rates could be more even. Commissioner Dugan explained the redistricting process and how the town would have to dissolve both districts and create new districts in order to do so. Commissioner Keyser emphasized the purpose of this meeting is to discuss this budget but other questions could and would be answered during the regular meeting that follows. Mr. Wedemeyer asked for an explanation of the overall increase in the proposed budget. Commissioner Dugan referenced additional hires, increased salaries/wages, inflation and healthcare costs as driving factors behind the increase for 2026.

Joan Kichury - A resident, Joan Couturie, argues that if District 3 is providing EMS and fire services to the other district (District 2), which has a larger tax base (rateables), then the other district should pay for at least a portion of the required additional manpower. She states that while she is thankful for the professional service from the ambulance and fire departments, it is a "life-or-death service," and those who participate should pay equally. She also suggests that companies whose employees are being served by these services in town should consider donating money.

Administrator Hark explained that being designated as the sole provider of EMS for the township by resolution, Hanover Township Fire District 3 is responsible for EMS coverage for the whole township, and the costs that go with it.

Commissioner Dugan stated that he believes the two districts will be consolidated within the next year, which will create a more equitable tax situation for all residents.

Richard Vitiello asked where the consolidation conversations are taking place. Commissioner Keyser explained reiterated this meeting must stick to conversation on the budget but any other questions can and will be answered at the regular meeting following the hearing.

Tony Yanez then asked about the referendum and if there was one since the overall increase he saw was \$800,000. Commissioner Harrington spoke to the importance of the referendum, specifically that if the referendum were to not pass, EMS and Fire response times would be negatively impacted, and major staffing cuts would need to take place. Commissioner Dugan explained that \$527,193.00 of the overall increase is the referendum.

Commissioner Keyser spoke to the severity of service impacts that would take place if the budget failed. He also stated that hopefully this would be the last time

that this current board needs to go for a referendum and that the "Township needs to step up to the plate and recognize there is a problem." Commissioner Keyser also stated he would never approve another referendum of this much money.

Tony Yanis asked what was reflected in the EMS income line that is listed at \$720,000. Administrator Hark explained that is the total anticipated income from all EMS billings for the year.

Mr. Wedemeyer asked if District 3 residents still get billed through insurance. Commissioner Dugan responded and explained that all patients will get a initial bill to their insurance company. If a resident of District 3 is billed, the remaining amount is not balance billed. District 2 residents do receive a balance bill, but it does not get sent to collections.

Ms. Kichury mentioned receiving persistent bills for an ambulance service that occurred over a year ago, even after insurance paid. Commissioner Dugan clarified that the policy for District 3 residents is that the district collects what the insurance company pays and that residents should not receive a bill for the remaining balance. Up to three notifications may be sent following the initial, but they are supposed to clearly state "This is not a bill."

Mr. Wedemeyer asked what percentage of the referendum increase is associated with the ambulance and EMS. Commissioner Dugan answered a majority of it is the salary of the two full time EMTs, the pension and their benefits. Mr. Wedemeyer asked about staffing structure along with the EMS cost impact. Administrator Hark stated that it is difficult to isolate the cost to just EMS because career staff are cross trained as firefighter/EMTs but that the increase on the EMS salary line alone was \$182,000, a 47% increase. Current staffing includes four tours of firefighter/EMTs and approximately 20 per-diem/part-time EMS personnel. Operationally, there is one dedicated ambulance during the day, with efforts to staff a second one when firefighter numbers permit or when per-diem staff are available for a "power truck." Mr. Wedemeyer asked the location of the ambulances and if one is in Whippany. Commissioner Dugan responded that one of the ambulances is stationed at the Whippany Fire Station to enable quicker response times on both sides of the township but can respond anywhere.

Mr. Hark Sr. asked if District 3 is "maxed out" in terms of new construction revenue from ratables compared to District 2. Commissioner Dugan responded

yes and that District 3's ratables only went up by \$5,000 this year. Commissioner Dugan stated PILOT programs can also play a role.

Richard Dunn stated he is more inclined to vote "yes" on this year's budget if it truly is one last increase and referendum before a merger. Mr. Dunn stated that it seems District 2 has been resistant to a merger in the past. Commissioner Dugan stated that at one point it was District 3 that was hesitant to move forward with consolidation, however progress has been made since and the last year the joint board met almost monthly for a majority of the year.

James Davidson stated that it seems like a majority of these increases is going towards increased staffing and asked for an explanation on the need for an increase in staffing. Asst. Chief McGuinness responded, stating that the department handled over 3,500 calls this year, making it the busiest fire department and one of the busiest EMS departments in Morris County and that the current staffing model relies heavily on per-diem staff who are only required to cover two shifts a month, leading to inconsistency. Hiring more full-time staff will provide more consistent coverage seven days a week, both day and night.

Joan Kichury pointed out that new developments (like those near BJs) are in Whippany (District 2) but are using services paid for by Cedar Knolls (District 3). She asked for the specific cost impact of the budget increase on individual households in Cedar Knolls. It was stated that for the average assessed household of \$450,000, the increase translates to \$20 per month.

Lauren Frey asked what percentage of calls are District 3, vs District 2, vs Mutual Aid. The data wasn't readily available but would be posted on the website.

Craig Vagell Jr. asked if the volunteer response and membership have declined over the years thus requiring the increase in the paid personnel being requested in this budget. Commissioner Keyser confirmed this and stated it is a national problem that exists.

Blanch Lopez reminded all in attendance that the fire district elections for both districts will be taking place on Saturday February 21, 2026 from 2-9PM and that it is very important that everyone go vote.

Mr. Yanis asked for clarification on if Whippany provides any tax contributions for EMS. Commissioner Dugan reiterated that Whippany residents and businesses do not contribute any tax revenue towards the EMS budget. The only financial contribution from the Whippany district comes from balance billing, which is the

portion of a bill not covered by a patient's insurance. This billing is directed at the individual patient, not a business or the town itself. Mr. Yanis asked how many fire calls specifically occur outside of our District. Assistant Chief McGuinness stated it would be posted to our website along with the other data being requested tonight.

Lauren Frey inquired how many calls were dropped vs answered in regards to mutual aid. Commissioner Dugan answered that it was pretty equal but data would be shared on the website following the meeting.

Daria Waszak asked if this budget and referendum would secure the current response times. Commissioner Keyser responded that yes but if only both the referendum and budget pass.

Debbie Elorette asked the board to confirm that for the price of \$150 for the average homeowner, that there is no change in service from what it currently is. Commissioner Dugan confirmed all would stay the same if not improve more.

Marc Lebowitz stated that for the district to continue to provide the services they are without a referendum or major increase next year, the township does need to step in and do something and he hopes that they will. Commissioner Dugan agreed and said the imbalance of tax rates between both districts just continues to grow.

Linda MacGray asked how much money was left uncollected from EMS last year. Commissioner Dugan said we can get that number from the billing company and post it.

Mr. Davidson commented and asked if balance billing amounts and what the district can and can't do with EMS income is regulated by CMS and Medicare. Commissioner Keyser confirmed.

Mr. Yanis asked where he could find the answers to the questions tonight. Administrator Hark stated that it would be under the FAQ section of the website.

Mr. Hark SR. asked if when the District takes a mutual aid call do we bill them and do they bill us if they come into our district. Commissioner Dugan answered yes it goes both ways.

Commissioner Keyser asked if there were any more budget related questions. Hearing none and seeing none, motion made to close public participation by Commissioner Harrington. Seconded by Commissioner Gallagher. All in favor.

RESOLUTIONS:

Resolution 26-01-15-10 to Amend the 2026 Budget Pursuant to N.J.S.A 40A:14-78.3 read by Commissioner Gallagher. Motion to adopt resolution by Commissioner Gallagher. Seconded by Commissioner Dugan. All in favor.

Resolution 26-01-15-11 to Adopt the 2026 Budget read by Commissioner Gallagher. Motion to adopt by Commissioner Gallagher. Seconded by Commissioner Dugan. All in Favor.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:52 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by

Robert Gallagher, Secretary