



**March 2, 2026**

**Ohio Township and Town of Chandler**

**Public Hearing – Fire Territory Proposal**

A joint public hearing of Ohio Township and the Town of Chandler regarding the proposed Ohio Township / Town of Chandler Fire Territory was held on Monday, March 2, 2026, at 7:00 p.m. at the Chandler Town Hall, 401 E. Lincoln Ave., Chandler, IN 47610.

**Attorney Jeff Bellamy** facilitated the hearing. Introductions were made of all officials present, including: Debbie Reid, Ohio Township Board; Ed Anderson, Ohio Township Board; Joshua Claybourn, Town of Chandler Attorney; Tonya Wester, Chandler Town Council President, District 3; Ron Whittedge, Chandler Town Council Vice President, District 4; Cheryl Amos, Council District 1; Tom Burnett, Council District 2; Sarah Eller, Council At Large; Chad Bennett, Ohio Township Trustee; Scott Finley, Baker Tilly; Susan Cowan, Baker Tilly; and Kayla Litton, Clerk-Treasurer for the Town of Chandler.

Mr. Bellamy reviewed the statutory fire territory hearing process, the published hearing schedule, and the hearing procedure for the evening, including that questions would be held until the end of the presentations and that public comment would be taken from individuals who signed in. He noted that no vote would be taken at this public hearing. Mr. Bellamy explained the distinction between a fire territory and a fire district, emphasizing that a territory is a voluntary agreement between two contiguous units that either may exit from year to year, whereas a district is created by county commissioners with limited means of dissolution.

Mr. Bellamy stated that this was the third and final public hearing of the three required by statute. He noted that the same fiscal and fire department presentations were made at all three hearings, and that the final public meeting, at which the two bodies would vote on whether to proceed, was scheduled for March 16, 2026, at 7:00 p.m. at Chandler Town Hall. He noted that the final meeting would not include additional presentations or public comment, but would allow the council, township board, and officials to ask questions and make statements before any vote. If the territory is approved, a short public hearing on an equipment replacement fund would also be held at that meeting.

**Presentations**

**Chief Scott Foreman of Ohio Township Fire Department** presented information regarding operational readiness, including national trends reflecting decreased volunteer availability and increased emergency call volumes. He reviewed National Volunteer Fire Council data showing a decline in volunteer firefighters since 1984 alongside a nearly threefold increase in call volume nationally. Chief Foreman discussed the time demands and training requirements for firefighters, noting that firefighter certification requires a minimum of 180 hours over 22 weeks with mandatory attendance, and EMT certification requires a minimum of 164 hours over 20 weeks. He reviewed OSHA two-in/two-out requirements and shared a firsthand account of an OSHA investigation following an industrial double-fatality incident at a previous department to illustrate the importance of compliance, noting that OSHA can issue fines and citations for noncompliance.

Chief Foreman discussed NFPA standards, explaining that NFPA 1710 requires 15 to 17 equipped and trained firefighters within eight minutes for career departments, and NFPA 1720 requires 15 equipped and trained firefighters within nine minutes, 90% of the time, for combination and volunteer departments serving urban populations. He reported that Ohio Township's overlapping call rate averages 27% and has been as high as 40%, and that Chandler's run projection for 2026 is trending toward 840 calls due to changes in the county's response matrix aimed at improving effective response force.

Chief Foreman reviewed current staffing. Ohio Township currently staffs four firefighters and a battalion chief at the Libbert Road station, with zero career staff at the Chandler station. The average response time for Ohio Township in 2025 was five minutes and 19 seconds. The Chandler Volunteer Fire Department's average response time for 2025 was seven minutes and 26 seconds. He reviewed NFPA staffing ratio data, noting the combined area currently has a ratio of 0.13 career firefighters per 1,000 population compared to comparison departments such as Evansville (0.79), Henderson (0.79), and Vincennes (0.82, with 16,000 population, four stations, and 41 staff). He noted the territory would improve the ratio to 0.39 initially and 0.57 by 2031, with volunteers serving as a force multiplier.

Chief Foreman presented proposed staffing, including career staffing at all three fire stations beginning in 2027, with a complement of four personnel per engine company. He reviewed the five-year plan projecting four stations and 67 total personnel by 2031. He also reviewed the capital improvement plan, including radio replacement, turnout gear (with two sets per firefighter for carcinogen exposure reduction), SCBA replacement, a fire boat for Ohio River coverage, apparatus replacement for aging fleet vehicles, and a planned fourth station. He noted the ladder truck at the Chandler station is a 2013 model with a four-to-five-year build time for replacement.

Chief Foreman shared a personal account of receiving fire department emergency medical services when his mother collapsed at a family Christmas gathering, describing the rapid arrival of a five-person engine company and how the experience changed his perspective on the importance of guaranteed career staffing for emergency response.

**Susan Cowan of Baker Tilly** presented the financial information, including the proposed fire territory tax rate phase-in and example impacts to taxpayers. Ms. Cowan reviewed the territory structure, explaining that Ohio Township would serve as the provider unit responsible for administrative functions, property tax receipt, and annual budget approval through the normal state budget process, while the fire territory advisory board would participate in budget development. She reviewed how current fire service funding is structured for both units, including Ohio Township's operating levy, cumulative capital fire fund, and public safety LIT, and the Town of Chandler's general fund allocation and public safety LIT share.

Ms. Cowan explained that the current property tax rate supporting fire in the Town of Chandler is \$0.0444 and in Ohio Township is \$0.1193, and that these existing rates would be replaced by the new territory rate to avoid duplicate taxation. The rate schedule presented was a phase-in beginning at \$0.2875 per \$100 of assessed value in the first year, increasing to \$0.3150, \$0.3450, \$0.3750, and ultimately \$0.4000 by 2031. She noted these are presumed maximums and that actual rates could come in lower if assessed values increase.

Ms. Cowan provided illustrative examples of tax bill impacts. For a \$200,000 residential homestead in the Boone Township portion of Chandler, the estimated first-year increase would be approximately \$231 per year (\$19.25 per month). For the same value home in Ohio Township, the increase would be approximately \$160 per year (\$13 per month). For the Ohio Township portion of Chandler, approximately \$128 per year (\$10 per month). She noted that higher-value homes in Chandler would be

pushed to their property tax caps, limiting or eliminating the increase. For Ohio Township, few homes at any value would reach their caps. She reviewed impacts on agricultural, rental, and commercial properties, and discussed circuit breaker cap mechanics and the 1%/2%/3% property classifications.

Ms. Cowan reviewed impacts to overlapping taxing units, noting increased circuit breaker losses for the county, schools, and libraries, and explained that Senate Enrolled Act One, adopted the prior year, would independently increase circuit breaker losses statewide. She discussed local income tax, noting that changes to the LIT structure originally scheduled for 2028 had been pushed to 2029, and that no changes to LIT allocations were anticipated due to the territory. She also reviewed motor vehicle excise tax reallocation effects.

### **Public Comment**

**Brittany Daugherty** stated for the record that she is not opposed to the establishment of a fire territory but is specifically opposed to the proposed tax levy. She noted that the proposed fire territory rate of \$0.40 per \$100 is only four cents below the entire Warrick County budget levy of \$0.44. Ms. Daugherty stated she had thoroughly reviewed Indiana codes governing fire territories, ISO ratings, NFPA standards, and tax levy regulations. She noted that the Chandler Volunteer Fire Department's average response time had been updated from 11 minutes and 23 seconds at the first hearing to seven minutes and 26 seconds, which she described as approaching the performance of top paid-only departments in southern Indiana despite Chandler's 30.5-square-mile service area. She questioned why the maximum allowable rate was requested when evidence may suggest a lower rate could suffice, and asked why volunteers are offered only \$250 from Chandler and Ohio Township with no further meaningful support. She urged the board and council to consider the levy in light of affordability for citizens.

**Nathan Smith**, 2999 North State Street (northernmost portion of Ohio Township), stated he lives in a family homestead originally built by his great-grandfather and later lived in by his grandparents. Mr. Smith described past attempts by family members and neighbors to gain access to city water, noting his grandfather was quoted over \$10,000 in the early 2000s and a neighbor was later told the price had more than doubled, with no guarantee of water supply. He stated that residents in his area still haul water to their homes. Mr. Smith stated that no one in leadership has previously been concerned about residents in the northern end of the township until it came to having them help fund a fire territory that he believes primarily benefits the southern portion of the township. He asked the bodies to vote no on the tax increase.

**Ivan Bates** stated he felt overwhelmed by the volume of estimates and proposed figures presented. He stated that Ohio Township residents pay slightly more in property tax to fund their fire service, while the Town of Chandler's fire service is supported by local income tax, and expressed concern that Chandler residents would see a property tax increase that primarily benefits Ohio Township. He compared the proposal to purchasing a Corvette when the community can afford a Mustang, stating the current volunteer system works and is affordable. He expressed opposition to the tax increase and asked, in the interest of transparency, how many officials present have family members on the volunteer fire department who would benefit from paid positions under the territory. He urged the bodies to vote no.

**Elijah Elikofer**, a Chandler Fire Department volunteer of approximately four years, stated that the volunteer system is struggling. He described responding to calls alone or with only one other person, including a mutual aid move-up to Boonville with only one firefighter on the truck. He described responding to CPR-in-progress calls with two or three trucks staffed by one person each, and response times of 10 to 12 minutes in some areas. He shared that responding to a traumatic incident led him to step down from a position at work due to the toll of volunteer service. He stated he supports the territory.

**Matt Sternberg**, a Chandler Fire Department volunteer of approximately three years, stated that volunteers are having trouble keeping up with run demand and cannot provide the level of care citizens deserve. He stated that in the past year, five to seven emergency runs went unanswered, requiring a different department to be dispatched. He quoted Evansville Fire Department Chief Tony Knight, who spoke at the 3:00 p.m. hearing, as stating that a fire doubles in size every 30 seconds and that the question residents should ask themselves is how much they are willing to risk. Mr. Sternberg noted that with career staff on station, response time could improve from several minutes to under two minutes for truck rollout. He stated he supports the territory.

**Daniel Hurnley**, an Ohio Township volunteer since 2007, described his experience through the transition from an all-volunteer to a combination department. He stated that when Chief Foreman was introduced, the chief laid out his vision for supporting volunteers and made clear they would continue to be needed. Mr. Hurnley described volunteering during the most recent winter storm, spending three and a half days at the station to help keep two stations fully occupied. He stated that through the combination department he has received EMT training and driver operator training, and expressed confidence that the territory would improve emergency response to his own home and across the community. He stated he supports the territory.

**Cara and Jason Holman** signed up to speak, but declined when called.

**Michael Wilson** stated he spent 26 years in the volunteer fire service with approximately 4,000 runs. He described call volume growth from 125 runs per year when he joined to 500 when he left, with that department now approaching 850. He stated he supports the territory, noting that while he does not want to spend more money than necessary, he questioned whether there is a dollar amount that can be placed on a life. He asked the officials to vote yes.

**Preston Sylvester**, a Chandler Fire Department volunteer for over five years (three as a cadet, two as a firefighter), stated he responded to the most runs in 2025 with a 77.34% response rate, many of them alone or with one other person. He stated that response times have gotten slower during his time with the department and that the community deserves fast response and adequate staffing. He described a recent gas leak incident at a Subway restaurant where it took 10 minutes to get a truck out the door, and he lived seven minutes from the station. He stated he supports the territory.

**Kevin Hill**, an Ohio Township volunteer for two and a half years, stated he came to the department with no experience or certifications and has since earned his fire certifications and is working on his EMT. He stated he is a Marine Corps veteran who struggled with purpose and direction after leaving the military, and that volunteering has given him that purpose back. He described Ohio Township as welcoming him with open arms and expressed hope that the department would be given the opportunity to expand its impact on others. He stated he supports the territory.

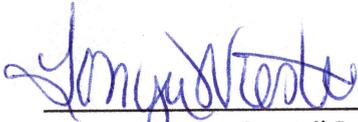
**Riley Denning**, an Ohio Township volunteer for three years, described the department's culture of professionalism, respect, and commitment to community service. He referenced his participation in a youth engagement program and stated that volunteers are valued members of the team, not simply additional personnel. He stated he supports the territory.

**Mike Hirsch** stated he appreciates the firefighters and the work they do but opposes the proposed tax increase, which he described as out of line. He stated that property tax is one of the worst forms of taxation and expressed concern about the impact on residents who are already struggling, including his five children and 14 grandchildren in the county. He stated there must be another way to fund the improvements without additional property tax and urged the bodies to find alternative funding sources.

**Shelly Bealmear** stated she is a private school teacher and understands the financial concerns raised by other speakers. She noted that the approximately 12.3% increase equates to roughly \$17.50 per month or about 58 cents per day, and compared that to the 20-cent gas price increase she observed that day and rising utility costs. She described two occasions when she called 911 and the volunteer fire department was the first to arrive, and stated she is willing to pay the equivalent of 58 cents per day to have four full-time career staff available for emergency response. She stated she supports the territory.

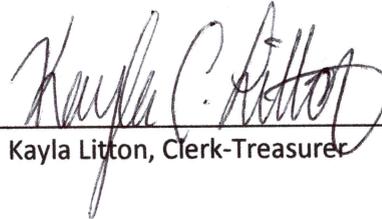
**Closing Remarks**

**Mr. Bellamy** reminded attendees that no vote would be taken at this public hearing and that the final public meeting was scheduled for March 16, 2026, at 7:00 p.m. at Chandler Town Hall, at which the two bodies would consider motions and vote on whether to proceed with the territory. He noted that if both bodies vote to move forward, a short hearing on the equipment replacement fund would follow, and that if one or both bodies do not vote to approve, the process would conclude. He thanked all attendees for their participation, noting the hearings had been very active. With no further public comment, the public hearing concluded.



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Tonya Wester, Council President



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Kayla Litton, Clerk-Treasurer