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**Whitley County departments investigating fire protection territory**

The governing units of four Whitley County fire departments have begun evaluating if a fire protection territory is right for the community. Both elected and fire officials of Columbia, Jefferson and Washington townships, and the City of Columbia City met recently to begin the research.

The partnered jurisdictions are researching the details of forming a fire protection territory, speaking with consultants and legal experts, evaluating the potential benefits and costs alike.

Officials will analyze the state of fire protection being provided to their taxpayers, how to improve it and how a fire territory could help funding to meet current needs.

In Indiana, fire protection territories are new units of local government formed between townships and municipalities for the purposes of levying taxes, delivering fire, rescue and EMS services. They differ slightly from fire protection districts, which are regulated by county officials.

Jefferson Township Trustee Chad Nix has been looking into options for sometime as his department struggles with staffing. “Our volunteer firefighters have been begging for help in the ever-changing and demanding fire service for many years. Now is the time to improve the fire service not only for our resident’s life and property protection, but also for the safety of our volunteers.” Nix said. Nix has pioneered the idea of a territory locally, bringing others together to begin these talks.

“With volunteering at an all-time low, and equipment prices at an all-time high, the need for something new has never been greater. Our volunteer firefighters need help” said Matt Minier, Columbia Township Trustee. “We want the public to know what we’re up against. This is not an inexpensive business. Professional standards have changed in the fire service over the last 30 years making things better for personnel and public alike, but these things aren’t free.”



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“Challenges exist for our trustees too,” Minier said. “This is not something we can simply spend our way out of, even if we wanted to” indicating it was time to look for a different answer to the problem.

The only paid fire department in the county, Columbia City, has also joined the evaluation, looking to provide a better solution for their citizens as well as help their neighbors. CCFD Chief Tom LaRue weighed in saying “nationally, the volunteer fire service is struggling with manpower. Whitley County and Columbia City aren’t exempt in this struggle. We are excited to research partnership opportunities with our fellow fire departments with a focus on improving service and return on investment for our citizens.”

The study is expected to last several months and local officials plan to keep the public posted along the way.