

**New Castle County Fire Service Strategic Planning Committee**  
**Thursday, January 28, 2026, at 2:00pm**  
**Location: Government Center – Executive Conference Room**  
**87 Reads Way, New Castle, DE 19720**

**MEETING MINUTES**

**Present Voting Members (In-Person or Virtual):** Co-Chairman Kenny Dunn, Co-Chairman Dennis Godek, Dave Del Grande, Bruce Pinkett, Joe Day, Councilman Kevin Caneco, Kevin Cowperthwait, Gordon Edwards, Fran Williams, Dan Burris, Lynn Wells and John Adams.

**Not Present Voting Members:** Councilman Brandon Toole

**Non-Voting Members present:** Staff Person Stephanie Warren, County Attorney Aaron Goldstein, and members of the public.

**1. Call to Order and Roll Call**

- a. The meeting was called to order at 2:00pm by Co-Chair Dennis Godek.

**2. Approval of Minutes**

- a. Meeting Minutes from January 15, 2026, were reviewed and discussed.
- b. **Motion:** To approve the minutes of the January 15, 2026, meeting:
  - i. Moved by: Bruce Pinkett
  - ii. Seconded by: Gordon Edwards
  - iii. Vote: In favor – Unanimous, Opposed – None.
  - iv. Motion carried

**3. Executive Order 2026-01**

- a. Executive Order 2026-01 was created to amend the following two motion requested changes of Executive Order 2025-05:
  - i. A quorum of five (5) members to seven (7) members
  - ii. Extend the deadline for the FSSPC to submit its final report from March 31, 2026, to January 31, 2027.
- b. The County Executive agreed and signed Executive Order 2026-01 on January 21, 2026.

**4. By-Laws: Amendment and Approval**

- a. The Committee considered amendments to the by-laws in accordance with the Executive Order.
- b. The key amendments included:
  - i. Increasing the quorum requirement to seven (7) members.

- ii. Changing the deadline for the Committee's final report from March 1, 2026, to January 31, 2027.
- c. **Motion:** To approve the amended by-laws, according to Executive Order 2026-01:
  - i. Moved by: Bruce Pinkett
  - ii. Seconded by: Gordon Edwards
  - iii. Vote: In favor – Unanimously, Opposed – None.

## **5. Redevelopment and Impact Fees**

- a. Clarification was requested whether redevelopment of Brownfield Projects is subject to impact fees. It was confirmed that redevelopment projects are subject to impact fees, with applicable credits for existing square footage.

## **6. Third-Party Study Clarification**

- a. Questions were raised regarding a third-party study believed to have been conducted in 2025. It was clarified that:
  - i. The study was conducted in 2022, not 2025.
  - ii. The study timeline was extended.
  - iii. The original firm was TischlerBise, while the newer study was conducted by a different firm, Rossi.
  - iv. The study was distributed by Stephanie Warren to the committee.

## **7. Fire Service – FY2027 Budget Update**

- a. Leadership met with the County Executive, Chief Administrative Officer, and Deputy Chief Administrative Officer to discuss budget matters.
- b. The Committee reaffirmed its intent to submit the budget with the previously identified funding framework.
- c. A proposed increase of \$200,000 for Special Operations was discussed.
- d. A percentage-based request tied to the total salary figures was outlined.
- e. Preliminary salary and benefits figures for calendar year 2025 from all 21 fire companies, part-time and career, were reported to be \$37,778,362.60 – rounded to \$37.8 million for planning purposes.
- f. The specific percentage to be applied will be determined prior to formal budget presentation. Discussions will continue.
- g. It was emphasized that fire companies and committee members continue to cooperate in good faith and that an extension of timelines does not imply that supplemental funding would not be provided.
- h. Committee members stressed the importance of addressing the funding requests within the budget and cautioned that failure to do so could raise concerns during County Council review.

- i. A comment was raised regarding whether budget percentage calculations should be based solely on salaries, excluding benefits. The issue was discussed at the Leadership Committee level, and no final decision has been made. Fire Companies continue to bear pension and benefits costs, which remain a consideration. The matter will be reviewed further.

## **8. FACETS Report Recommendations & Prioritizations**

- a. Under Executive Order 2026-01, the Committee is obligated to discuss the recommendations contained in the FACETS Report. It was acknowledged that while all recommendations are important and must ultimately be addressed, some may be of higher priority than others.
- b. Kevin Cowperthwait independently prepared a draft prioritization list using three levels (high, medium and low priority) that Stephanie Warren shared with the Committee.
- c. The Committee discussed potential approaches to prioritization, including individual review and group discussion.
  - i. County Attorney Aaron Goldstein gave them guidance regarding compliance with FOIA requirements. – emphasizing that serial or informal meetings among a quorum of committee members outside of a properly noticed public meeting could violate FOIA.
  - ii. The most compliant approach recommended was for each member to independently review and prioritize the FACETS Report recommendations and return prepared to discuss and deliberate at a noticed public meeting.
- d. The Committee agreed that Kevin Cowperthwait's draft prioritization list would be distributed to members for review in advance of the next meeting.
- e. **Motion:** To receive the draft prioritization list prepared by Kevin Cowperthwait prior to the next meeting, review it individually, and conduct a full discussion and prioritization of FACETS Report recommendations at the next meeting:
  - i. Moved by: Gordon Edwards
  - ii. Seconded by: Fran Williams
  - iii. Vote: In favor – Unanimously, Opposed – None.
- f. The Committee discussed the possibility of dedicating a future meeting agenda item, or a special meeting, to focus exclusively on prioritization, recognizing the importance of this work to guide future action.

## **9. FACETS Report Recommendation – Emergency Resource Analysis**

- a. Discussion clarified that should the County and Fire Service be parties to a future operational or deployment study, they would have greater authority

and involvement in both the consultant selection process and ongoing oversight of the study. It was noted that during prior studies, including the FACETS Report, limited involvement led to delays and reduced transparency because the Fire Service was not the direct customer.

- b. The Committee emphasized that being a formal party to any future study would help ensure better communication, timeliness, and alignment with operational needs.
- c. **Motion:** To defer FACETS Report recommendation No. 8 (operational/emergency resource study) until it is considered in the proper order following the Committee's prioritization of all FACETS Report recommendations.
  - i. Moved by: Gordon Edwards
  - ii. Seconded by: Fran Williams
  - iii. Vote: In favor – Unanimously, Opposed – None.

## **10. Review of Tax Exemption and Assessment Data**

- a. The Committee received a detailed overview of countywide tax exemption and assessment data, including categories such as senior exemptions, veteran disability exemptions, general exemptions, government-owned properties, educational institutions, religious and charitable organizations, civic and maintenance corporations, parkland, housing authorities, and volunteer fire company exemptions.
- b. Co-Chair Kenny Dunn explained the statutory and administrative basis for these exemptions, noting that:
  - i. Many exemptions are established by State law under Title 9 of the Delaware Code, while others are authorized by County Code.
  - ii. County Government does not have authority to exempt school district taxes.
  - iii. Applications for general exemptions are reviewed by the Department of Finance and the Office of Law for legal compliance.
- c. Discussions around the scope and definitions of certain exemption categories, particularly civic, fraternal, and development-related entities, and whether exemptions should apply uniformly in the context of potential fire service fees. It was clarified that the purpose of the discussion was informational and exploratory, not to alter exemption status at this time.
- d. Co-Chair Dunn advised that deviating significantly from existing State and County exemption frameworks could result in substantial legal review, administrative delays, and system changes. Any changes affecting exemptions established in State code would require engagement with State Legislators.

- e. Members agreed that reviewing exemptions may be appropriate in the future, it should not delay the Committee's current priority-setting work.

### **11. Building Permit Fee Legislation Update**

- a. An update was provided on proposed legislation to modify building permit fee caps contributing to the New Castle County Fire Service Fund. Key Points included:
  - i. Removal of the term "volunteer" to reflect support for the entire fire service.
  - ii. Increasing the commercial permit fee cap from the first \$1million to the first \$10million in construction value.
  - iii. Based on recent figures, the change is projected to generate just over \$1million annually for the fund.
- b. Draft legislation has been submitted to the Office of Law for review, followed by Finance Department and Executive Office for policy review. The goal is to secure sponsorship and enact the legislation as early as possible, potentially by late February or early March.
- c. The Fire Service Leadership Committee noted that any future changes to the distribution formula for new revenues would require additional engagement with fire companies and would not be pursued during the current fiscal year to avoid delays and budgetary impacts.

### **12. Meeting Schedule**

- a. The Committee discussed establishing a regular meeting schedule.
- b. **Motion:** To establish that Committee meetings shall be held on the second and fourth Wednesdays of each month at 2:00 p.m., with the understanding that the Committee reserves the right to reschedule a meeting in the event of a conflict that would prevent the establishment of a quorum.
  - i. Moved by: Gordon Edwards
  - ii. Seconded by: Fran Williams
  - iii. Vote: In favor – Unanimously, Opposed – None.

### **13. Public Comment**

- a. Michael Edwards expressed support for continued collaboration between County Government and the Fire Service, particularly in engaging State partners to address long-term funding challenges.

### **14. Adjournment**

- a. Meeting adjourned at 3:11pm.

## **Action Items & Next Steps**

### **1. Fire Service Budget & Funding**

- County Administration/Finance to continue working in good faith with Fire Service representatives regarding supplemental funding needs for fire companies.
- Budget Office to ensure the final recommended budget reflects the funding levels requested by fire companies, recognizing that insufficient funding may raise concerns during County Council consideration.

### **2. FACETS Report – Recommendation Prioritization**

- All Committee Members to independently review the FACETS report and prioritize recommendations prior to the next meeting, using a high/medium/low or similar framework.
- Committee to dedicate time at the next meeting to formally discuss and establish an agreed-upon priority list for FACETS report recommendations.

### **3. Emergency Resource/Deployment Study (FACETS Recommendation)**

- Committee to defer consideration until the full prioritization of FACETS report recommendations is completed.
- County Administration and Fire Service Leadership to note that any future study would require an RFP process, committee review, and established timeline.
- Fire Service Leadership to consult with fire companies regarding potential cost-sharing and participation should the Committee later decide to move forward with a study.

### **4. Tax Exemptions and Assessment Review**

- County Staff to provide informational context only at this stage regarding tax exemption categories and statutory authority.
- Committee to acknowledge that any changes to State mandated exemptions would require engagement with State Legislators and should not delay current priority-setting work.

### **5. Building Permit Fee Legislation**

- Office of Law to complete legal review of proposed legislation modifying building permit fee caps for the Fire Service Fund.
- Finance Department and Executive Office to complete fiscal note and policy review following legal approval.
- County Council sponsors to be identified, with the goal of introducing legislation as early as late February or early March.
- Fire Service Leadership Committee to defer any changes to distribution formulas until a future fiscal year (FY2028) to avoid budgetary delays.