

After 4 Years of Fire Budget Defeats, Awareness Effort Convinces NJ Voters to Say Yes

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LEZA RAFFEL, Correspondent

The Fifth Time's the Charm

After four years without voter support, East Freehold Fire Company knew the pitfalls of failed referendums too well: Delayed truck repairs, aging ladders, and rescue and breathing apparatus in critical need of replacement.

"We had basically gotten by postponing maintenance, but this situation was unsustainable," said East Freehold Fire Chief Mike Murray.

Freehold Township Fire District #2, the entity which funds East Freehold Fire Company, made a commitment to strengthen public awareness by funding an information campaign so that this time, residents were not making voting decisions based on rumors, inaccuracies or lack of details.

Through an intensive, six-week campaign utilizing social media, targeted residential mailings and digital advertising, voters received accurate and compelling information about the fire district's proposed budget and how passing it would improve safety in their community. On February 17, 2024, voters approved the budget funding turnout gear, training, Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus and insurance for East Freehold Fire Company's firefighters, who are all volunteers. The budget also covers maintenance, repairs and insurance on trucks, equipment and gear.

How was the fire company finally able to garner voter approval? The carefully-timed steps it took to build a comprehensive communication effort follow:

Identifying a Partner to Get the Message Out

Just six weeks before the budget referendum vote, the Fire District hired the Communication Solutions Group, a communication consulting company that

Delayed maintenance and gear replacement had already created situations in which East Freehold could not adequately respond to a call, forcing mutual aid requests to a neighboring fire company. Especially with an increase in

A Message About East Freehold Fire Company
Facts and Figures to Note Before You Vote Feb 17...*

#1 East Freehold Fire Company responded to over **435 calls in 2023**, with an increase in **rescue** and **structural fire** calls.

#2 We are a **100% volunteer** fire company serving citizens **24/7!** While the average cost of a career firefighter is \$62,437, East Freehold firefighters do not receive pay!

#3 An **increase in residential and commercial development** in our Township means **more** residents placing **911 calls**.

#4 Voting for our carefully planned Fire District Budget ensures that East Freehold firefighters are adequately trained and equipped to **save lives** and **protect property**.

#5 Under the proposed Fire District budget, the **tax rate will remain flat - without increase -** for the average homeowner.

Budget Breakdown:

- MUNICIPAL OPEN SPACE 1.4%
- COUNTY BUDGET 15%
- LOCAL MUNICIPAL BUDGET 15.6%
- REGIONAL SCHOOL BUDGET 19.3%
- LOCAL SCHOOL BUDGET 49.8%
- FIRE DISTRICT .9%

Only .9% of the entire Township Budget goes to the Fire District. Voter support is critical!

***See other side for voting details.**

Side one of residential postcard used to educate voters

specializes in both volunteer firefighter recruitment and issue management for fire and EMS companies. While based in Pennsylvania, the company has experience winning budget referendums in both NJ and PA. During its first meeting with East Freehold Fire Company, Communication Solutions emphasized the importance of providing clear and understandable facts to its citizenry.

Communication Solutions honed in on the key points that needed to be reinforced repeatedly through the campaign:

Delayed maintenance and gear replacement due to four years of failed referendums threatened firefighter and public safety. Voting in favor of the budget would help protect firefighters and residents.

911 calls, this was not sustainable.

Approving the proposed budget would not result in a tax increase for the average homeowner.

Navigating a Tight Timetable

Voters who vote by mail could cast their "yes" or "no" vote a few weeks before in-person voting, so getting the message out right after the New Year was critical. Communication Solutions Group worked backwards from February 17 and developed a strategy that would ensure that taxpayers had received communication from the fire company at least three times each week.

The Kickoff Postcard Mailing

The only way East Freehold Fire Company could be absolutely certain that

continued

Awareness Effort Convinces NJ Voters to Say Yes, *continued*

voters got the precise information the fire company wanted them to have was to deliver it themselves. In mid-January, 4,300 households received oversized postcards with FAQs, charts and statistics showing why public safety necessitated an approved budget. A reminder of the voting location, date and time, as

Freehold Township. A series of informational posts were created and posted on these local social media pages, as well as on East Freehold Fire Company's social media page (which fed directly into its website).

Communication Solutions then tracked the shares and comments on

mail-in voting, which fire company was represented by the fire district (something that can often confuse New Jersey residents). Responses from citizens on social media expressing gratitude for the reminders and the ongoing sharing of factoids generated a new sense of optimism. And for a good reason...

Important Voting Details


Q: What Fire District Am I in?
A: If you have received this postcard, you are in Freehold Township Fire District #2.

Q: What is the ballot question I am being asked to vote on?
A: Shall the following amount of money be raised by taxation for the ensuing year.

Q: What is covered in this budget if it gets approved?
A: Turnout gear, training, Self Contained Breathing Apparatus and insurance for our 100% volunteer firefighters (life, workers comp, and injury); maintenance, repairs and insurance on trucks, district buildings, equipment and gear; utility costs.

Q: What impact will the Fire District budget - if passed - have on my taxes?
A: Taxes will remain unchanged for the average homeowner.

East Freehold Fire Company
191 Dutch Lane Road
Freehold, NJ 07728



2 Ways to Vote:

By Mail:
Ballots must be postmarked by February 17 to count.

OR

In-Person
Saturday, February 17, • 2 PM- 9 PM
East Freehold Fire Company
191 Dutch Lane Rd., Freehold

YOUR VOTE IS NEEDED!

For more info visit: www.eastfreeholdfire.com

THIS POSTCARD MADE POSSIBLE BY FREEHOLD TOWNSHIP BOARD OF FIRE COMMISSIONERS DISTRICT NO. 2

Side two of residential postcard used to educate voters

well as a mail-in reminder were displayed prominently.

Writing and Publishing “The Big Story”

Instrumental to this informational campaign was the writing of a story that explained the impact that failed budgets were having on the fire company's ability to ensure public safety. The article was 100% factual and there was no disputing that the fire company's plight was becoming untenable.

Since the fire company did not have a local print newspaper, Communication Solutions published the story on Freehold Patch and then carried the link over to local social media pages to maximize readership.

Harnessing the Power of Social Media

Through its research, Communication Solutions identified almost a dozen social media sites which focused on

the posts and provided clarification or answers to questions when they were posed by citizens. Sometimes, comments were the catalyst for the creation of new charts, such as one that showed that only .9% of the entire township budget goes to the fire district.

Expanding Voter Reach Through Geo-Targeting

Recognizing that not everyone in the voting area follows local social media pages or browses the fire company's website or social media pages, Communication Solutions used geo-targeting to push important information to township residents every time they went on their personal social media pages.

Reinforcing Voting Dates and Details

Leading up to voting day, Communication Solutions saturated the community with continuous reminders: when and where to vote, the deadline for

Budget Approved, Stalemate Ends

A busy six weeks of writing, design, mailings, social media posts, PR and digital advertising yielded the results East Freehold was hoping for: The fire budget passed!

“Through the communication plan we implemented, it really helped people understand what the fire budget is and why its passage enables us to stay a volunteer fire company and keep our citizens safe,” said Chief Murphy. “My advice to other fire companies would be to get the word out. Plan ahead and start doing it early. Keep your residents in the loop with ongoing communication.”

LEZA RAFFEL is the president and founder of the Communication Solutions Group in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, a full-service marketing firm that provides recruitment and communication support for volunteer fire departments and EMS squads. She is a past speaker for the Eastern Division of the International Fire Chiefs Convention, the Firemen's Association of Pennsylvania conference, the New Jersey EMS Conference and the New Jersey State Firemen's Association Convention. She has a bachelor of science degree in communications from Ithaca College. She can be reached at 215-884-6499 or Leza@comsolutionsgroup.com