



P. MICHAEL STURLA
CHAIRMAN

MAJORITY POLICY COMMITTEE

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
HARRISBURG

HOUSE MAJORITY POLICY COMMITTEE HEARING
Topic: Fundraising Options for Volunteer Fire Companies
Richland Fire Hall – Johnstown, PA
January 21, 2010

AGENDA

10:00 a.m. Welcome and Opening Remarks

10:10 a.m. Ed Mann
Pennsylvania State Fire Commissioner

10:40 a.m. Public Comments

12:00 p.m. Closing Remarks

Statement for the House Majority Policy Committee

January 21, 2010

OFFICE OF THE STATE FIRE COMMISSIONER

Edward A. Mann, State Fire Commissioner

Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am thankful you invited me to provide testimony here today regarding poker tournament fundraisers for volunteer fire companies.

I have no doubt that poker tournament games such as "Texas Hold'em games could provide a significant source of revenue for volunteer fire and ambulance services. I have read the stories and have spoken to officers of fire companies who have used these tournaments as a source of funding. From that perspective, I support the idea of allowing volunteer fire and emergency medical services organizations to use some form of regulated, controlled Texas Hold'em tournaments.

However, I do have some very serious concerns with the expansion of small games of chance because there are significant problems with the current small games of chance law. Allow me to explain.

Under the current law, the proceeds from small games of chance can be used to pay prizes, purchase additional small games of chance. The balance of those proceeds (profits) is, by law, then to be used to benefit a public interest.

In the case of a volunteer fire company, one would think the profits would be used to benefit the firefighters in the purchase equipment or pay bills related to firefighting. However, in far too many cases the firefighters see very little -- if any -- of the profits especially when a bar or social club also exist within the fire department.

Several examples of this come to mind.

A fire department in Lebanon County was actually paying monthly rent to the bar to keep fire trucks in the fire station.

A fire department in Columbia County had water coolers in the apparatus bays, the Trustees determined that \$10.00 a month was too much money, so they had them removed. The following week the Trustee's of the fire department purchased two big screen televisions for the bar.

Another fire company in Central Pennsylvania spent over \$300,000 to remodel their bar while the firefighters saw a \$300.00 donation from the bar for the year.

I could go on and on with more examples but I believe you get the picture. I know this may be hard to accept, but my experience has been that there are very serious abuses by many fire companies that have bars that operate small games of chance. Frankly, these games have become "large games of chance" in many fire companies with the profits being spent on subsidizing low drink and food prices and the refurbishing the bar with big screen televisions and other items. The actual firefighting operation is seeing little, if any, money from those small games of chance.

I could only support Texas Hold'em tournament legislation that has very specific -- and enforcement language -- ensuring firefighters and their operations were to benefit from the profits.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify here today and I will answer any questions you might have.