

Sen. Lisa Baker – House Bill 1706
December 11, 2013

Thank you, Mr. President. We cannot overlook the importance of what we are doing today to help our fire companies. Nor can we overlook the virtue of what our volunteer firefighters do every day.

This bill was one of the chief priorities advanced by firefighters at a joint hearing of the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee and the Majority Policy Committee in Gettysburg in October. Senators Alloway, Erickson, Waugh and Yaw joined me at that hearing and heard from speaker after speaker about how difficult it is to fight fires in the new millennium.

Although firefighters sounded the alarm about a host of issues at our hearing, the root of all hurdles, not surprisingly, was money. Cash-strapped budgets have a domino effect on emergency response. It becomes a vicious cycle. A lack of money causes a seemingly endless need for fundraisers, which leads to a loss of volunteers, which further strains those left to pick up the slack. In the world of public safety, a shortage of money, volunteers, training and equipment can have deadly consequences.

You may recall that last session, Sen. Ward led the charge to expand grants to volunteer fire companies through Senate Bill 866. House Bill 1706 builds upon her efforts by increasing the amount of loans that fire companies can borrow for essential apparatus and equipment.

While costs have skyrocketed, loan limits have remained frozen at inadequate levels. In 1984, a self-contained breathing apparatus was \$900; today, \$5,000. A pumper truck cost \$100,000. Today, it costs \$525,000 – again, more than five times as much.

Under House Bill 1706, most loan limits will double. This increase does not keep up with the cost of inflation, but it is a marked improvement.

Many fire companies are waiting to purchase equipment, and their purchasing decision rests on the passage of this bill today.

We need to fight for our firefighters.

Many people are unaware that 97 percent of our firefighting force in this Commonwealth are volunteers—more than almost any other state. And where 40 years ago, we had volunteer 300,000 firefighters, today we have only 50,000.

Yet, without promise of a paycheck – or even a thank you – these men and women voluntarily don pounds of equipment and run into burning buildings in danger of collapse, in order to save our loved ones and personal treasures.

I urge you to support this legislation, and in doing so, support the firefighters of this Commonwealth, who answer the call any time of day or night. Our firefighters have been sounding the alarm for years about the challenges they are facing. We must continue working to answer their call.