
NEWSLETTER FOR MUNICIPAL EMA'S

SUMMER EDITION - 2010

Columbia County EMA

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COMMONWEALTH vs. STATE WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Unfortunately the phrase, "we're a commonwealth" is sometimes viewed as an excuse for passing the buck to another level of government. In order to promote its original intent of being a government of the people focused on mutual cooperation, it would be beneficial if everyone had a basic understanding of how it was designed to work.

Our Country has four states that call themselves Commonwealth's, with Pennsylvania being one of them. Pennsylvania's Constitution was enacted in 1776 under commonwealth principles, which guaranteed certain individual freedoms and put the power of governance in the hands of the people. This was in stark contrast to the English Monarchy that was in power at the time.

When our Nation's Constitution was ratified eleven years later it contained the principles which guaranteed our individual freedoms and how our Country was to be governed. To make a long story short the United States Constitution doesn't differentiate between a State and a Commonwealth. Everyone enjoys the same freedoms so in essence State's and Commonwealth's are one in the same.

A county is a political sub division that serves as an agent of the state for judicial

administration, holding elections, property assessment, regional planning, and providing a variety of social & welfare programs. The county also supports public safety with: 911 coverage, EMA coordination and by maintaining a county prison.

The Pennsylvania Legislature acting within the scope of its authority under the U.S. and State Constitutions has chosen to vest considerable authority on municipalities. The intended purpose was to provide people with the opportunity to be engaged in their government and to make decisions on many local issues which have the greatest impact on daily life, however responsibility always accompanies authority.

A municipality has public safety responsibility by assuring police, fire, ambulance and EMA services are available to their jurisdiction. Municipal government also provides for the maintenance of local roads, sewage treatment, planning, zoning, recreation, code enforcement and licensing. Municipal officials have the authority to levy taxes to support local programs and enact ordinances that provide for general welfare.

State law offers options for consideration by those municipalities experiencing difficulty fulfilling their statutory responsibilities. Options include but are not limited to: mutual aid, inter-governmental cooperative agreements and mergers.

Remember, government was not originally designed to be everything, to everyone, all the time. We the people are expected to do certain things for ourselves. For example when it comes to public safety we should do everything we can (legally & within reason) to protect ourselves, our family and our property.

In conclusion, it would be a mistake for us to presume we can sit on the sidelines and let our municipality provide for our every need. It would also be a mistake for our municipality to presume a higher level of government will voluntarily take on their responsibility just because a situation brought with it unanticipated expense or controversy.

Our Pennsylvania style of governance in unison with the U.S. Constitution provides for individual freedoms and promotes additional benefits if people are willing to keep informed and participate for the common-wealth!

BURN BANS AND FIREWORKS DISPLAYS

Burn bans and fireworks displays are two examples where key decisions are made at the local level. Who better to decide which activities are permissible or restricted in a municipality than the people who live there? Naturally the catalyst for decision making by supervisors and council members should always be based on what's best for the community at large, with the safety, health and welfare of residents always the first consideration.

Burn bans – can be permanent or temporary. Temporary burn bans are often enacted due to prolonged dry periods. When dangerous wildfire conditions exist the local elected body should consult with their fire chief and consider enacting a municipal

burn ban. Temporary burn bans are usually in effect for a period of thirty days. Burn bans must be advertised in the newspaper before they take effect.

When a municipality signs a burn ban into law they should advise Columbia County EMA. If burn bans are received from all sections of the county then it becomes apparent extreme dry conditions are widespread and a county-wide burn ban should be considered.

Fireworks displays and purchases without a permit are illegal in Pennsylvania. Fireworks are generally considered to be aerial and exploding devices not handheld sparklers and caps.

A local municipality is the only governing body in Pennsylvania that issues permits for fireworks displays. Fireworks permits are not transferable. A municipality that permits fireworks displays must have a fireworks ordinance.

Before a permit is issued the municipal fire chief or codes officer must inspect and approve the site where the fireworks display will be held. The municipality must also require the applicant post a bond of at least five hundred dollars.

Professional fireworks display companies must be registered with the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office. Local police have jurisdiction in cases where persons are using fireworks illegally.

2010 SUMMER WEATHER RUNS THE GAMUT

So far this summer Columbia County has experienced a prolonged dry spell, heat waves, severe summer storms and the threat of flash floods and mudslides from torrential rainfall.

Drought - There are three drought stages in Pennsylvania. They include watch, warning and emergency. When a drought watch or warning is issued the public is requested to voluntarily cut back on water usage. With a drought emergency comes mandatory restrictions.

PA DEP is the lead state agency in determining if the issuance of a drought declaration is warranted. Drought declarations are based on stream flows, rainfall, reservoir levels, groundwater elevations and soil moisture.

Since April 1st Columbia County has experienced a rainfall deficit. DEP is closely monitoring the situation however so far no drought declarations have been issued.

Heat waves occur when the temperature reaches or exceeds 90 degrees for at least three days in a row. Small children, the elderly and persons in poor health are often susceptible to heat related disorders including: sunburn, cramps, heat exhaustion and heat stroke.

Heat stroke is a severe medical condition which requires immediate emergency medical care or it can be fatal. The symptoms of heat stroke are: very high body temperature, hot dry skin, rapid and strong pulse as well as possible unconsciousness. Pre-hospital care for heat stroke victims should be focused on reducing body temperature; by carefully moving the patient to a shaded or cool place, removing excessive clothing and patting down with cool compresses. Giving fluids to drink is not recommended as part of initial first aid for heat stroke.

General heat wave safety tips include: slowing down, wearing lightweight light colored clothing, drinking plenty of water, avoiding the mid-day sun and spending

time in fan cooled or air conditioned places. We should also encourage the public to check on elderly family, friends and neighbors. It is also advisable never to leave a child or pet in a parked car as temperatures will rise to dangerous levels very quickly.

Lightning – most injuries and fatalities from lightning occur during summer afternoon or evening storms when people are caught outdoors. Advise the public to seek shelter in a sturdy building away from windows or in a hardtop car as soon as they hear thunder. It's also a good practice to unplug TV's & computers and avoid showering and hard-wired telephone usage during lightning storms,

Wind - sometimes large hail precedes a tornado touchdown. The safest place to be when a tornado warning is issued is in the basement or an interior room on the lowest level of a sturdy building. It is best to avoid trailers, mobile homes and buildings with large open roof spans. Never try to outrun a tornado with your car; you may be safer lying flat in a ditch.

A downburst is a rapidly descending air mass located beneath a thunderstorm; it is commonly referred to as straight line winds. Down bursts can exceed 100 mph and be as dangerous and cause as much damage as a tornado.

Flooding The water runoff from a severe, pop-up thunderstorm can change a dust bowl like environment into a dangerous, destructive, soggy mess very quickly. Also within a week a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico could travel our way and dump enough rain to cause the Susquehanna River to overflow its banks.

By revisiting potential hazards we can assess our current level of preparedness and take the steps necessary to be ready.