

SWATARA TOWNSHIP
INVESTIGATORY PANEL REPORT

Concerning the Friendship Fire Company & Bressler Club

April 29, 2024

Introduction

In 2021, Swatara Township received a complaint of racially discriminatory practices at the Friendship Fire Company and its associated social club, the “Bressler Club.” An investigation was opened by the Township which involved the assistance of the Pennsylvania Office of the Attorney General. In 2022, the Office of the Attorney General issued a letter requiring the Fire Company to amend its by-laws, constitution, website, and affiliated sites online. In March of 2024 another complaint was received by Swatara Township concerning the same issues at the Fire Company and/or the Bressler Club. In response to the March 2024 complaint, Swatara Township closed the Fire Company temporarily and pursued further investigation. The Township established a panel of five individuals to conduct an investigation into the complaint and provide information back to the Township Board of Commissioners. To date, the Investigatory Panel has met several times and conducted multiple interviews. The names of specific people are not included in this report so as to protect their identity. This report serves as the final report of the Investigatory Panel in an ongoing investigation.

Background Information

By way of background, the Friendship Fire Company is located at 625 Main Street within Swatara Township. Its associated social club, the Bressler Club, is located at 757 Main Street, also within Swatara Township. Although the firehouse and social club have two different buildings, they are one and the same legal entity. They both share the same board of directors and are governed by that board. Further, the Fire Company is under the jurisdiction of, and is partially funded by, Swatara Township. From the Swatara Fire-Rescue website: “The company [Friendship Fire Company] received its charter on March 30, 1920, and started out in a shed with a combination horse and hand-drawn apparatus acquired from a nearby fire company. In 1921 a one-story frame building was constructed. Bressler’s present firehouse was built in 1936, the same year the company bought a new fire engine. The Ladies Auxiliary was formed in 1937 and helped pay for the new equipment. Then in 1945, Friendship Fire Company bought a one-story frame building a block up from the firehouse, which the company dedicated its social club there 11 years later.” (Source: <https://stfr91.com/stations/friendship/history/>)

Membership Practices

The complaint received in March of 2024 came from Complainant #1 who is a black male. He indicated that on March 16, 2024, he and his wife went to the Bressler Club during a St. Patrick's Day celebration. He and his wife were not members of the Club, but they reside in Bressler and were interested in participating in this local establishment. After being in the Club for a given amount of time, Complainant #1 was approached by a person in the Club and was asked if he had a membership. Complainant #1 then asked the bartender, a white male, for an application and was told that the Club was not accepting any new members. Not long after this occurred, Complainant #1 learned of rumors that the Bressler Club has been known to refuse memberships to minorities. This caused Complainant #1 to voice his concerns with Swatara Township.

During the course of the Investigative Panel's interviews, we heard the following statements regarding membership practices:

1. Firefighter #14: The original by-laws of the Fire Department were written to only allow white males. Firefighter #11 believes this didn't change until 2019. Firefighter #14 believed that change occurred in the 80's.
2. Firefighter #10: (In response to, "Are you aware of any level of discrimination within the Friendship Fire Company?"): People have different feelings at the Club than at the firehouse. None of the people with different feelings are active firefighters.
3. Firefighter #2: (In response to, "Are you aware of any level of discrimination within the Friendship Fire Company?"): "I thought the problem was fixed the first time." (Referring to a similar investigation by the Township in 2021.)
4. In a message to a Township official, Firefighter #2 stated, "Did you know that multiple attempts have been made to separate membership status to further differentiate CLUB [emphasis in the original message] members and FIRE COMPANY members? The firefighters can never get the votes to make the by-law amendment, but we have sure tried to get ourselves separated from those at the CLUB. So, while the business of the CLUB opens and operates as normal, the firefighters are paying the price [i.e. the current suspension of services] for actions of CLUB members. It makes no sense to me and many others."
5. Person #5: (In response to, "Are you aware of any level of discrimination within the Friendship Fire Company?"): Stated, "Not that I have any 1st hand knowledge of."
6. Multiple Interviewees: To become a member, a person must get signatures of either 2, 3, or 4 active members. Then the Board must approve the person for membership.
7. Firefighter #6: Claimed there are minority members in the Bressler Club but could not name them or estimate the total number of people in the organization. They also

claimed that they had a black female friend join the Bressler Club at some point in time. They did not name the female. This firefighter said two active members must sign for a new member, and then two board members must also sign, and then a majority vote is required to accept a person into membership.

8. Firefighter #21: Stated there have been black members of the Fire Department in the past. When asked how many they replied, "Somebody said three." Also stated that 99.9% of the time applicants are approved, unless "something happens" before their name reaches the Board. Also stated that they, "generally do not decline people for membership." Stated the Club is involved in membership. The Club runs their own operation and may have about three minority members.
9. Firefighter #14: Named one prior minority member of the Fire Department.
10. Firefighter #11: Stated that until "recently," women were only allowed to be social members of the Fire Department. A person who is a minority wished to join the Fire Department but was denied a Club membership; the meeting to "vote him in" was moved from the Club to the firehouse. Prior to that incident, all meetings were always held in the basement of the Bressler Club. Once signatures are gathered for membership, this firefighter believes it requires a unanimous vote from the membership to approve. However, this firefighter stated that by the time the membership application got to the Board, they never saw anyone denied. The Club bartender manages people interested in membership; he or she will produce a card for the person to obtain signatures. Usually, the card is simply passed around the bar for the number of signatures needed. This firefighter heard that white people usually require two signatures to join, but black people are usually told that applications aren't being accepted, or simply never receive feedback about their declined application. The membership enrollment process is never closed. No one gets through the doors of the Bressler Club as they are normally locked except for active members.
11. Firefighter #1: When he joined, he only needed two signatures from active members. Then, after a certain firefighter would "sign for anyone," the requirement went from two signatures to four.
12. Person #17: Former firefighter who is aware of a black male who attempted to join the Bressler Club years ago and was denied without explanation. This interviewee was accepted as a social member within the past couple years, and only needed two signatures.
13. Firefighter #12: Heard a rumor that the by-laws were only changed in the last 10 years to allow people other than "white males" to join. He also heard about the denied membership of a black male mentioned by Person #17. Heard a rumor that the number of signatures required for membership was increased specifically to make it more difficult for minorities to submit applications. Also heard that membership requirements

were just changed to allow females to become active firefighters, but not voting members of the Club (related to firefighter #11's comment).

14. Firefighter #9: Stated they believed there are four or five minority members of the Bressler Club but did not name them. Also stated there are no minority firefighters.
15. Firefighter #6: Stated they are involved at the Bressler Club but had no idea how many members of the Club are minorities (if any) nor how many total members exist.

Rental Practices

The Friendship Fire Company has the ability to rent either the upstairs or downstairs of the Bressler Club, another room at the firehouse, and Cibort Park, which is a few blocks away from the firehouse. During the course of the Investigative Panel's interviews and investigation, we heard the following statements regarding rental practices:

1. In a message to a Township official, Firefighter #2 stated, "Did you know that the FIRE COMPANY [emphasis in the original message] rents out their banquet hall to anyone who lives within the Village of Bressler?" And, "The FIRE COMPANY doesn't care who rents the hall, as long as they live 'in town'."
2. Firefighter #11: Stated it was common practice to deny minorities the ability to rent the Bressler Club, but that minorities would be allowed to rent the room at the firehouse.
3. Firefighter #1: Sometime in 2017 or 2018 this firefighter made a suggestion to close the social hall at the firehouse and use it for another purpose. This was met with a lot of negative feedback from the members who frequent the Bressler Club. This firefighter was later told by another firefighter that the reason for the negative feedback was because the social hall at the firehouse is rented to black people who aren't allowed to rent space at the Bressler Club. This firefighter believes these rental practices are still in place today. This firefighter also stated that the firemen are not the problem.

Statements Made in Public

During the course of the investigation, the Investigative Panel was made aware of the following allegation, which was turned over to the Pennsylvania Office of the Attorney General as one component of their initial investigation:

1. Person #23: This person works at another local club. They alleged that in 2021, an active firefighter from the Friendship Fire Company was soliciting donations regarding a Fire Department event. Person #23 asked if the head of their club, who is a black male, could come to the Bressler Club to present the donation check. Person #23 also asked if the Fire Department would be open to accepting black firefighters. The firefighter responded that it, "would never happen." Person #23 also alleged that the firefighter told them to be careful because they were in the 1st due area of the Friendship Fire Company.

Miscellaneous

During the course of the investigation, the Investigative Panel was provided with the following information as well:

1. Firefighter #21 and #9: Stated that dart and pool teams from other clubs are allowed to come to the Bressler Club to compete, and those teams have minority members.
2. Person #23: At least one dart team from another local club has stopped competing at the Bressler Club due to their perception of discrimination at that location.
3. Firefighter #11: Stated that anyone who serves on the Board at the Friendship Fire Company would have to know that discrimination is common practice. They also stated that long-time residents of Oberlin, Bressler, and Enhaut would also know it is common practice. However, Firefighter #1 stated that he wasn't sure if the firefighters serving on the Board knew what was going on (relative to discrimination). Firefighter #11 stated, "The firehouse is not the issue, the Club is the issue."
4. Firefighters #13, #1, and #18 all spoke of fire helmets being stolen from the Friendship Fire Company with no known suspects.
5. Firefighter #1: Stated that they questioned why "No Trespassing" signs were being erected at Cibort Part (in 2020?). The firefighter was told by a long-time member of the Bressler Club that it was because he, "Doesn't like black kids messing things up." Firefighter #12 heard this same information as a rumor.
6. Firefighter #1: Stated the majority of their firefighters prefer not to be associated with the Club.
7. Firefighter #1: Stated that whenever anyone brings up the idea of splitting the Bressler Club and the firehouse, the Bressler Club regulars pack the room to ensure they win the vote to keep the Club and firehouse legally combined. Firefighter #10 made the same comment. Firefighter #2 referenced this issue as well.
8. Firefighter #13: Some firehouses in Swatara Township have a reputation for "running" women away from their firehouses.
9. Firefighter #10: During regular meetings of the Fire Department, all of the firefighters sit on one side of the room while all the Bressler Club regulars sit on the other side of the room. Stated, "Club members are different from the firefighters." The Panel heard this from more than one interviewee.
10. Firefighter #2: Stated that the Friendship Fire Company "helped" a firefighter "find his way out" of the Department after he had allegedly made remarks about black males. This person is no longer a firefighter in Swatara Township. Also stated they're not sure if the Bressler Club values diversity the same way this firefighter does. Stated that firefighters don't hold to the "Club standards."

11. In a message to a Township official, Firefighter #2 stated, "The suspension of the firefighters for actions of club members seems to be misguided...", "Racism is not welcome within the walls of our station and never has been. Cultural diversity is welcome with us at the FIRE COMPANY [emphasis in the original message], regardless of what people at the CLUB do," "The CLUB [emphasis in the original message] has its own management and employees, is self-sustaining, and operates independently under the fire company name," and "The Township...made a poor decision to suspend the FIRE COMPANY [emphasis in the original message] for actions of CLUB members."

Conclusion

As was stated at the beginning of this report, this is an ongoing investigation and this report represents the findings of the Investigative Panel. Prior to being interviewed as part of this investigation, each interviewee was advised of the purpose of the investigation and signed a form indicating that they would be truthful with the information provided to the Panel. It was learned that some interviewees had 1st hand knowledge of things they discussed, and others did not. During the course of the investigation to this point, the Panel found no reason to prevent several firefighters from continuing in their service to the community and were recommended to be returned to duty at other Township firehouses. At this point in the investigation, the Panel has been provided with a very large amount of information from multiple sources. Unfortunately, the information leads us to believe that the allegations are founded and that discriminatory practices at the Friendship Fire Company and/or the Bressler Club are likely to be taking place with regard to membership and rental practices. For this reason, it is the Panel's recommendation that the investigation regarding these allegations continue through the agency of proper jurisdiction, thereby closing the investigation being conducted by our Panel. Should the Panel receive additional information of inappropriate or criminal conduct, that information will be forwarded to the Pennsylvania Office of the Attorney General. Furthermore, as long as the Friendship Fire Company and the Bressler Club share the same board of directors, exist as one legal entity, and receive funding and support supplied by Swatara Township, it is our recommendation that the Friendship Fire Company remain suspended from service during the course of the investigation.

Respectfully Submitted,

The Members of the Swatara Township Investigatory Panel