

Greenville Fire District Board of Fire Commissioners' Response to the Consolidation Study

In the summer of 2009, Supervisor Feiner and the Greenburgh Town Board created a committee to study the concept of consolidating the town's three independent fire districts. The Greenville Fire District Board of Fire Commissioners carefully evaluated the concept of consolidation and determined that the impact on the fire district would be an immediate increase of over 20% in fire district taxes. Alan Hochberg, Feiner's appointee to chair this committee, was invited to attend two meetings of the Board of Fire Commissioners to discuss the formation of his committee. Mr. Hochberg stated that his committee's goal was to put a referendum to consolidate the three districts on the ballot in the elections of November 2010. Further, Mr. Hochberg told the Board that although his committee would have nine members from the three fire districts, Greenville would not be permitted to have three residents serving on the committee, so that representation from each district would not be equal. Based on the negative financial impact on the taxpayers of Greenville Fire District, coupled with the unequal representation issue, the Greenville Fire District Board of Fire Commissioners decided not to participate in the commission. However, the Board made it clear to Mr. Hochberg that if his committee could show us that there would in fact not be a massive tax increase for Greenville, or any other negative affects, the Board would remain open minded and would be happy to revisit the issue and reconsider its participation.

In the ensuing seventeen months, the Board of Fire Commissioners held regular monthly meetings, advertised and open to the public, and conducted two annual budget hearings at which detailed financial and related information was reviewed and discussed. Nobody from the committee ever attended any of the fire district's meetings. The Board was disappointed that the commission chose not to participate and listen to the open and public process of the Greenville Fire District.

In November 2010, at the conclusion of the consolidation study, a "pre-final report" was issued, in fact confirming the prediction set forth by the Board of Fire Commissioners of a 21% tax increase for Greenville. Further, the committee reported only selectively chosen facts, and ignored other data that did not support their agenda.

For example, a prediction of extremely high tax increases beginning in 2011 has already been disproved by the very modest tax increase announced by Greenville for fiscal 2011. This low tax rate is not, as implied by the report, a one-year phenomenon, but rather a continuation of a trend of low tax increases. Greenville Fire District's annual tax rate increase over the last three years has averaged 2.9% per year - compared to the Town's average annual increase of 11.6% for the same three-year period. For 2011, the Greenville Fire District tax rate increase is 1.75%, not the 8.4% predicted by the committee.

While the basis of any decision to consolidate services must include an analysis of operations and the quality of the services provided, the committee neglected to address these issues. Rather, in the closing section of the report, there is a list of five very general "operational issues that need to be determined." Specifically, the critical issue of staffing in fire units is completely ignored. As an example, will the staffing in ladder companies comply with the NFPA standards of three firefighters and one officer as currently staffed in Greenville, or will staffing consist of only one firefighter per unit as practiced in some other departments? Any reduction in staffing represents a serious reduction in fire protection and public safety.

The committee's analysis of automatic and mutual aid does not take into consideration how these agreements, put in place to provide and utilize manpower and equipment across department boundaries, are instituted and how they are executed in practice. For example, the automatic aid provided by Greenville to the Sprain Parkway, which is primarily in Hartsdale's district, is inexplicably disregarded. Accordingly, the aid analysis is flawed and biased.

Further, the report contains sharp criticism of "excessive overtime payments" which it terms as a "burden" on the fire district budgets. In reality, Greenville Fire District realizes significant savings through the payment of overtime wages at the straight time rate in order to meet staffing needs. A comprehensive and thorough study of the possible consolidation of ten fire departments in lower Westchester was conducted by the independent Pace University Michaelian Institute in 2009. This study cites the practice of a lower staffing level utilizing overtime to fill vacancies to be the most efficient and least costly department staffing model. This is the staffing model followed by the Greenville Fire District.

As always, the Board of Fire Commissioners of Greenville Fire District welcomes comments from the public and is always available to answer questions posed by its taxpayers. The fire district's website (www.fdgrenville.com) provides detailed, current information on the operations and finances of the district. The residents of the fire district directly elect the members of the Board of Fire Commissioners, each required by law to be a taxpaying resident of the community, entrusting them to carry out the responsibilities associated with the management of a safe, efficient and fiscally sound fire department. All of the district's public meetings are announced well in advance, and are always open and informational. The Greenville Fire District encourages all residents and objective parties to attend its meetings and participate in the process.

The suggestion by the Consolidation Committee that the creation of a "watchdog" to be appointed by the town to interpose between the residents and their elected Board members insults the Edgemont Community, which has repeatedly expressed its appreciation and support for Greenville Fire District.