

Edgemonters speak out against potential fire consolidation

By HEATHER MURRAY

Edgemonters expressed their opposition to a potential fire district consolidation Monday night at a joint meeting of the Edgemont Community Council and the Greenville Fire District.

Earlier this year, Greenburgh Town Supervisor Paul Feiner proposed setting up a commission to explore the possibility of consolidating the Fairview, Greenville and Hartsdale districts into one Greenburgh fire district. Under a recently passed state bill making it easier for local governments to consolidate, 10 percent of registered voters in the Fairview, Greenville and Hartsdale fire districts would need to submit a petition to dissolve their local fire districts and consolidate. The petitions would trigger a referendum, which would need only a simple majority vote to be approved.

The commission, chaired by Hartsdale resident Alan Hochberg, is now studying that possibility and expects to issue its findings by April.

David Stern, a volunteer firefighter, said the idea of consolidation "seems quite reasonable," but wouldn't work in Edgemont. "First and foremost, we want to keep our fire safety and our services at or above the current level," he said. Stern doesn't believe the consolidation would result in lower taxes for Edgemont, but

even if it did, he would not support it. "I don't trust anyone outside Edgemont to make decisions about Edgemont fire," he said of the Greenville district. He spoke of the Greenburgh Town Board making cuts to the police department last year despite opposition from Edgemonters, and said he wouldn't want to cede local control to a townwide board of fire commissioners.

Mrinal Jhangiani said she wasn't willing to compromise safety even if there were cost savings from the consolidation. "We don't want it," she said of consolidation.

Greenville volunteer company president Jon Faust said one of his concerns about consolidation is "what it might mean five years from now or 10 years from now." He worries that later on a fire engine could be taken out of Greenville to cut costs (Greenville currently has both a ladder and an engine company), or that personnel could be cut.

Richard Crane said he liked the fact that his district was run by "people in the community." Under a consolidation, Edgemonters would make up less than a third of the district's voting power.

ECC president Bob Bernstein spoke of the tax increase he believes Edgemonters would incur if the three districts were consolidated. Greenville's 2009 budget was roughly \$7.3 million, while

a combined budget for the three districts is \$28 million. Bernstein feels Fairview and Hartsdale residents would pay less after consolidation, while Greenville residents' taxes would see an increase of around 21 percent. "They'd have to cut 18 percent to keep taxes flat," he said.

Hochberg said neither he nor Feiner would support a consolidation for Greenville if Edgemont's taxes would go up because of it.

"We're trying to see if a better use of personnel could make a difference," he said. Hochberg added that if one takes a "superficial look" at budgetary numbers, it seems like there would be an enormous increase for Greenville. But further analysis might unearth savings from consolidation.

"This community has nothing to fear from our commission or from Paul Feiner," Hochberg said.

Feiner said he has heard from many people who can't afford to live in Westchester County any longer. He is making cuts to the town budget this year, he said, including 7 percent decreases in the library, parks and recreation and community center budgets.

"The cost of our government is too high," he said. Feiner said he won't support consolidation if it would raise Edgemonters' taxes. But if the commission

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finds consolidation would result in more efficiency, better services and lower taxes, "I would say go ahead and be open minded."

Feiner also told the Inquirer that beyond consolidation itself, sharing more services such as administrative personnel might save taxpayers money.

Fire district 101

Board of fire commissioners chairman Michael Golden gave some background on the district, which was formed in 1913. Greenville employs 23 firefighters, five captains and one chief. The district currently has one vacancy. Fire commissioners are elected for five-year terms, and this December Walter Groden will be up for re-election.

Commissioner Helene Orce spoke of fire district services outside of fighting fires including dealing with hazardous materials, conducting home and business inspections, serving as emergency medical technicians and responding to building collapses.

Commissioner Mike Rappe emphasized that the fire district has already been sharing services through their mutual aid policy with neighboring districts for years. Five years ago Greenville instituted an automatic aid policy with Hartsdale for major fires. Both Greenville and Hartsdale will respond to major fires in each district. Under mutual aid, they would only respond if called on to do so. "It automatically adds three or four additional firefighters at the scene at the critical time" for a fire, Rappe said.

Greenville participates in mutual aid with Eastchester, Fairview, Hartsdale, New Rochelle, Scarsdale and White Plains.

Commissioner Groden spoke about the narrow scope of the ISO's public protection classification program, which is used to rank fire districts by their ability to suppress fires.

Groden said the ISO rating is largely focused on a fire district's ability to prevent large fires and doesn't take into account a number of other factors, such

as life safety issues or trainings that fire departments conduct. On a scale of 1-10, 1 being superior, Greenville is ranked a 4. Fairview is also 4 and Hartsdale a 3 on the fire suppression scale. "We're in the top third for the state of New York," Groden said.

Some have claimed that under any consolidation, the ISO rating could be lowered and potentially save on insurance costs. Groden said Greenville researched that possibility and found it wouldn't result in savings for residential properties. Residential property insurance companies treat any community ranked 1, 2, 3, or 4 the same for cost purposes. There could potentially be savings for commercial properties, which are evaluated differently, he said.

Arnold Laubich asked what it would take for Greenville to meet the National Fire Protection Association standards. The nonprofit NFPA's codes and standards are intended to minimize the possibility and effects of fire and other risks and include minimum response times for fires and minimum staffing levels.

Rappe said Yonkers is the only local fire district that meets those standards and Greenville would have to hire "another 25 or 30 firefighters" to meet the standards.

Commissioner Bob Bruckenthal said Greenville has a new Web site, www.FDGreenville.com. Residents can find general information about the district there along with news, events and budgetary information. Bruckenthal said the district plans to post its monthly financial statements on the site.

David Chao requested that the district provide "your actual expenditures" on the site. A mailing that went home to Edgemonters recently compares this year's proposed budget with last year's proposed budget. Chao would like the fire district instead to show residents how much of the previous year's budget was actually spent and on what, noting the Edgemont School District just presented a five-year history of its expenditures, detailing what it actually spent each year.