

Proposal wouldn't improve service

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New York's current fiscal woes have given greater urgency to exploring ways to reduce costs and still maintain quality services. Recent legislation making it easier for special districts to effect consolidations is one example. One form of consolidation being proposed is consolidation of fire districts.

Pace University's Michaelean Institute for Public Policy and Management recently released a study that presents a case for consolidating 10 Southern Westchester fire districts, including Greenburgh's three fire districts as well as Scarsdale, Larchmont, Eastchester, Mount Vernon, New Rochelle, Pelham and Pelham Manor. While a regional consolidation of 10 districts may deserve further study — certainly greater cooperation among districts for purchasing, training and mutual aid should be explored — it does not follow that all consolidations will produce beneficial effects.

In this regard, Edgemont residents should be very concerned about Town Supervisor Paul Feiner's campaign to consolidate only the town's three unincorporated fire districts — Greenville (Edgemont), Hartsdale and Fairview. Unlike the Michaelean study, which focuses on complying with higher fire protection standards and achieving economies of scale through consolidating 10 districts' resources, Feiner's focus in consolidating the town's three fire districts is on reducing costs and maintaining current levels of service. Consolidation of the town's three fire districts may not promise improved fire service, but one thing it does promise is higher fire taxes for Edgemont residents. Feiner is forming a commission to look into consolidation and to evaluate the feasibility of a referendum in 2010.

Consolidation of only Greenburgh's three fire districts will not benefit Edgemont. Here's why:

- Consolidating only the town's three unincorporated fire districts won't do anything to improve service, such as response times. Although both Fairview and Edgemont are contiguous with Hartsdale, they are distant enough from each other that their firefighters would require more than eight minutes to get to a fire in each other's area. An eight-minute response time is a National Fire Protection Association standard that the Michaelean study maintains the 10 fire districts, if consolidated, would be able to meet for the entire district. Under a

town-only consolidation, other districts nearer to Edgemont and Fairview still would be called first.

- Consolidation will lower fire taxes for Hartsdale and Fairview, but it will increase them for Edgemont because Edgemont will pay a proportionally larger share of the consolidated fire budget. Although Edgemont represents about 23 percent of the total unincorporated tax base, Edgemont would represent about 31 percent of the combined districts' tax base because not all of the unincorporated area is in one of the three fire districts. (Some unincorporated areas are in fire protection districts, which would not be included in

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a consolidation because they obtain fire services from the villages.)

Using 2009 budgets to illustrate the point, the Greenville Fire District costs about \$7.3 million (before revenue income) to operate. The three fire districts' appropriations total \$28,035,331. If Edgemont were required to pay 31 percent of the cost, its share would increase from \$7.3 million to around \$8.7 million, nearly a 20 percent increase. In effect, Edgemont would be subsidizing the other two districts. There would have to be a huge amount of savings (or cuts) for Edgemont to come out ahead — and nobody is suggesting that would be the case.

- In a consolidated district all capital improvements would become the responsibility of the consolidated district. The Michaelean study points out that Fairview's two fire houses need significant capital improvements: one "needs major work"; the other "needs replacement." One of Hartsdale's facilities is newly renovated; the other has work in progress. Greenville's facility is newly renovated; it needs minor work — brick pointing. In a consolidation, Edgemont would assume its proportionate share of the cost to rebuild the Fairview facilities.

- Greenville's fire tax rate is substantially below that of Fairview and Hartsdale. For 2009, Edgemont's fire tax is 63 percent of the town tax, but in Fairview,

it's 81 percent of the town tax; and in Hartsdale it's as high as 84 percent of the town tax. Also, fire taxes have increased at a greater rate in Fairview and Hartsdale over the past few years than in Edgemont.

- Even if some cost savings were achieved, it would not be significant enough to reduce Edgemont's taxes. Eliminating one or more highly paid fire chiefs would require the hiring of other supervisory personnel at the two firehouses in Fairview and Hartsdale, respectively, plus the one at Greenville, which would likely result in no net savings at all. Any savings achieved through cuts in firefighting personnel would reduce response time and quality of service. In fact, the Michaelean study assumes no cuts in the number of firefighting personnel.

- Under a consolidation, Edgemont would lose control over its fire district. We currently get to elect our fire commissioners who are responsible for drawing up the budget every year — and because they live in Edgemont too, they pay the same taxes that we have to pay. Were the three districts consolidated, they would still be a separate entity with their own budget, but the town board would appoint the fire commissioners, who would make all decisions for the district. Even if the consolidated district were to elect the commissioners itself, Edgemont would be outnumbered and lose any voting control. Given the town's fiscal management decisions of the last several years, does Edgemont really want to cede fiscal management of its fire district to the town's politically appointed commissioners?

The new state law permits consolidation to be put to a referendum upon a petition by 10 percent of a district's registered voters. Residents of the district must then vote on whether or not to consolidate. The law also permits a local governing body (in this case the fire commissioners) to commence consolidation by endorsing a joint consolidation agreement. The law excludes village fire departments because they are operated as departments of the village government rather than as separate districts. Edgemont cannot afford to ignore this issue.

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