

Monroe taxpayers are often unaware of bills incurred by their fire districts

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(April 29, 2007) — In Monroe County, suburban homeowners have seen the cost of fire protection increase at a rate 31 percent higher than school property taxes.

Fire district and department costs in towns overall have more than tripled since the mid-1980s and are expected to nearly double by 2010, reaching as much as \$66 million, according to a report by the Monroe County Fire Advisory Board.

Most of the fire protection in Monroe County is provided by fire districts, a layer of government separate and independent of towns, villages and the county. The districts have their own budgets funded by property taxes, elect their own officials and decide how to spend taxpayer money.

Town and village governments have no oversight and can't control their fire district spending. Residents are often unaware of the costs and seldom vote or question what they do know because of the importance of fire service.

"It's political suicide," said Irondequoit Supervisor Mary Ellen Heyman about why town leaders are reluctant to push for changes. "Fire districts don't want other people telling them what to do."

A \$3.2 million firehouse is being built in Greece for the Ridge Road Fire District, approved by 68 voters in a referendum last year. The new station has given Ridge Road the most debt — \$3.9 million in 2006 — of all fire districts in the county, according to the state Comptroller's Office. Of the 23 fire districts and 15 fire departments that operate 89 firehouses serving Monroe County, 15 of the districts had debt last year.

A 1932 state law authorized towns to create fire districts, but towns can't change what they've created unless they are asked to by the district. Many districts haven't been adjusted to reflect population shifts.

For example, Irondequoit has a pumper truck for every 4,256 residents while Rochester has one for every 12,417 residents. Twelve pumper trucks, which can be found in the town's five fire districts, put out 13 structure fires last year, besides responding to emergency medical calls.

High costs are evident in other upstate metropolitan areas. Tax dollars raised for fire services between 1998 and 2005 increased 21 percent in Erie County to \$17.7 million, 53 percent to \$6.7 million in Onondaga County, and 43 percent to \$9.3 million in Albany County. In suburban Monroe County, the increase was 78 percent to \$36.4 million.

Fire officials say a large increase in emergency medical calls and a shrinking pool of volunteer firefighters have required more paid staff members and expanded facilities. Suburban fire service remains a bargain, they say, because many departments still use volunteer firefighters.

State lawmakers, the only elected officials who can impose changes on fire districts, have taken steps toward accountability with new laws requiring that each fire district hold a public hearing before adopting a budget and have an independent annual audit.

Greece resident Lora O'Neil, 32, doesn't know much about fire service but is receptive to changes that could reduce fire taxes. "Anything that would save tax money would be a good thing," O'Neil said.

Rising costs and calls

The 2006 report by the county Fire Advisory Board, which surveyed most of Monroe's suburban fire departments, paints a picture of districts struggling to keep volunteers and turning to paid firefighters as they respond to a growing volume of calls that have nothing to do with fires. The number of paid firefighters more than doubled between 1984 and 2004, to 205, according to the report. The number of volunteers edged down 6 percent to 2,280.

Meanwhile, the number of fire calls dropped 33 percent and calls for emergency medical service increased 117 percent from 1990 to 2004.

"The fire service has evolved over the past 30 years to more of a multidisciplined emergency and nonemergency response organization," said Harold J. "Bud" Phillips, chief for the Ridge Road Fire District. Phillips said six of every 10 calls are for emergency medical assistance, which mirrors a national trend.

A drop in volunteers and an increase in paid firefighters from one to 13 since 1998 have been major reasons why the budget for Ridge-Culver in Irondequoit has tripled in less than a decade to about \$1.5 million. Property taxes for fire service for a homeowner with a \$100,000 house in this district nearly quadrupled, from \$69 annually to \$261, in less than 10 years.

The Insurance Services Office, which rates communities for fire protection readiness, says residents in developed areas should be within 1.5 miles of a firehouse. A 2003 report by the Rump Group — local business and community

leaders seeking cost savings — showed that many Irondequoit neighborhoods were within 1.5 miles of more than one firehouse.

State Sen. Joseph Robach, R-Greece, said each community must decide what kind of fire services should be provided — and fire district elections offer such an opportunity.

But Irondequoit residents and officials haven't questioned the overlap. In fact, the five members of the Board of Fire Commissioners for Ridge-Culver all ran unopposed in recent years, receiving no more than 43 votes and as few as 23 votes.

A 2001 referendum to borrow \$2.6 million to remodel and expand the Ridge-Culver station was approved 100-67.

Questions of accountability

The lack of accountability in fire districts was most strikingly apparent on Long Island.

In March 2006, eight people, including five current and former fire commissioners, were arrested and charged with stealing about \$550,000 in public funds. The arrests included the chief fiscal officer of a fire department, who allegedly stole about \$509,000 from 1999 to 2005 and used the money at casinos, restaurants, clothing stores and entertainment events.

Other defendants have been accused of about \$50,000 in improper expenses related to travel and lodging during fire district junkets.

That prompted state lawmakers to require fire districts to hold a public hearing before adopting budgets and to undergo independent annual audits.

The state Comptroller's Office released new audits this month that found that the West Islip Fire District spent \$615 on adult entertainment, television subscriptions and movies. Several Monroe County fire districts examined in these audits fared better. The Spencerport Fire District, for example, refused to spend public funds on an annual dinner.

An audit of the Henrietta Fire District that was made public in January showed inappropriate spending of almost \$6,000 in public funds between Jan. 1, 2005, and Aug. 9, 2006, on such items as alcoholic beverages and a dinner to celebrate a new chief.

"By serving alcohol at its events, the district also may be putting itself at risk for liability arising from injuries or accidents of those attending," the report said.

F. Joe Martin, a past chief of the Henrietta department and current chairman of the Board of Commissioners, disputed the findings in a letter to the Comptroller's Office.

"There is no prohibition in the statutes cited, or anywhere else in town law against expenditures for alcoholic beverages at district functions," Martin wrote.

Martin argued that because of the difficulty of recruiting volunteers, the events are considered "an actual and necessary expense for firefighting purposes."

Henrietta is another community that has seen the amount of property taxes needed to support its fire district's six firehouses spiral upward — from \$2.3 million in 1998 to \$5 million in 2007.

Earlier this month — by a vote of 84 to 78 — residents in the Henrietta district voted down the borrowing needed for a \$2.7 million new firehouse.

Losing volunteers

The increase in operating costs is repeated elsewhere as fire districts lose volunteers. When Fran McKenna, 60, first volunteered 33 years ago for the Barnard Fire District on the east side of Greece, the district had 80 volunteers to help the 12 paid staff members.

Currently, the district has 53 volunteers and 18 paid staff members, whose salaries and benefits accounted for more than half of Barnard's \$2.6 million budget for 2006.

About 75 percent of the calls Barnard firefighters responded to last year were for medical service. Unlike some fire departments, Barnard will dispatch a rescue vehicle, usually staffed by two paid firefighters, to almost any call.

McKenna could volunteer during days because he sometimes worked a night shift at Eastman Kodak Co. But with the loss of manufacturing jobs and two-income families more common, volunteers available during the day have become scarce.

McKenna's son, Sean, 23, volunteers at Barnard, but on a limited basis, since he holds a full-time job and two part-time jobs as an emergency medical technician.

At the Webster Fire Department, family tradition also runs strong. Jerry Daloia, 56, began volunteering with the department 18 months ago because his sons, Vinny, 25, and Dominick, 23, were both volunteers.

Dominick has since moved to Syracuse, where he became a volunteer firefighter. Vince, who hopes to become a professional firefighter, is still volunteering with

the Webster department and recently graduated from the state academy in Schuyler County.

Alternative approaches

Fire districts are likely to be a topic on the agenda of the 15-member panel Gov. Eliot Spitzer appointed last week to study ways to consolidate local governments — and save tax dollars.

"Consolidation does not mean less services or loss of jobs," said former Rochester Mayor William A. Johnson Jr., a member of the panel.

Johnson said the committee needs to think of new ways to provide fire service more cost-effectively.

Charles Zettek, the Center for Governmental Research's director of government management services, urges more sharing of resources. Such an approach, Zettek said, should have been applied to the station now being built by the Ridge Road District in south Greece.

"A regional approach would have made the station unnecessary," said Zettek, noting that much of the area covered by the new firehouse is also within 1.5 miles of stations in Rochester and Gates.

Ridge Road Chief Phillips said the new station is needed because response times of his firefighters from existing stations are too long to the southern part of Greece. The Gates station nearest Greece uses volunteers who could not be counted on for a quick response, he said, but Zettek suggests that problem could be addressed by putting paid firefighters with the volunteers at the Gates station.

Other possibilities for reducing costs are having more fire stations defer to ambulance services in responding to low- priority medical service calls.

The Rochester Fire Department, for example, generally responds only to emergency medical calls in the top two of four priorities because Rural/Metro Medical Service has a contract with the city to respond to all calls.

Possibilities for efficiencies were the focus of a March presentation made to fire officials by the county Fire Advisory Board's Strategic Planning Committee.

But the next step is up to the fire districts.

"No one can direct what they can do," said Steve Bowman, Monroe County's public safety director.

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