New challenges for

District leaders to keep an eye on spending, benefits, response times

BY ELIZABETH MOORE
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The vast new firehouse the Coram Fire District begins
building this year — with color-coordinated carpeting, rec rooms and tiki bar — has fulfilled hopes that buying Long Island's biggest
guest firehouse would end its mattress slide. Coram had 148 volunteers in 1993, and just 120 by 2007. And those who do
volunteer put in less.

"If anybody reports they're having no problems, I'd question that," said Commissioner Tom Lyman of his peers. "It takes a lot more effort for us to provide the service."

Last year, 17 new members were added to the rolls — a result, Lyman said, of intensive outreach. But those gains were
outpaced by calls for medical aid, which rose to more than 2,500 last year, outnumbering fire calls 4 to 1.

To keep up, Coram hired more paramedics. Now, this volunteer fire district employs 46 people, one for every four
volunteers. That helps explain why even with its building paid off, Coram's fire tax cost almost as much as the police.

Four years ago, after Newsday's intensive look at Long Is-
land's fire system, officials agreed reforms were needed and the state passed a raft of new laws to rein in waste, boost volunteerism and in-
crease transparency. Their success has been decidedly mixed.

Stricter oversight has moderated some spending on trucks and travel, as has new mandatory training for commis-
sioners. More than 30 districts froze or reduced their budgets for 2010.

But both costs and calls for help continue to rise, and volunteer
ing isn't keeping pace. Fire districts still are spending money in ways that don't give taxpayers a voice. And citizens
who will have a chance to vote Tuesday — fire district leaders to keep an eye on spending, benefits, response times.

The Syosset Volunteer Fire Department is putting away
$800,000 in reserve funds for 2010 and is replacing a
10-year-old ladder truck.

Volunteers
and hiring

While the number of fire department volunteers remains
largely flat and fire emergencies have dropped in the past
five years, calls for medical aid by an aging population have
continued their relentless rise Islandwide — forcing districts
to dramatically increase their paid workforce.

In Nassau, volunteer fire membership has risen about 16
percent in the past four years, to 9,383. In Suffolk, membership
has been flat at 10,780 members last year. Some experts attri-
but to the increased appeal of benefit programs, which can include tax
breaks, access to government health plans, and pension-like
service-award payments.

But the paid workforce continues to grow rapidly. In Nas-
 sau, fire districts employ 496 full- and part-time workers, a
26 percent increase from 2004. They have handed off an
increasing share of calls to the police ambulance service, which
staffed 22 full-time ambulances in 2004, 26 this year, and plans 28 next year, a spokes-
man said.

In Suffolk, fire districts have 1,686 workers on the books — a
34 percent rise from five years ago. That includes more than
500 emergency medical technicians employed in 30 depart-
ments. Others are hiring responders under unskilled job ti-
tles so they can hire fewer members; Islip, for instance, has eight custodians who drop their brooms and volunteer
whenever a medical call comes in. It recently expanded the hours covered by the custodi-
ans because unpaid volunteers were not responding reliably, Bleidner said.

Spending
keeps rising

Some fire budgets seem to show a sensitivity to this steep recession: more than 30 districts are reducing their tax lev-
ies next year. But overall, the districts have not imposed much austerity.

Indeed, 2010 fire budgets are up an average of 25 percent from 2005, far outpacing the 9
percent inflation so far. During this same time, Nassau and Suffolk counties cut general-fund spending by more than 5 percent.

To be sure, much of the fire district spending was on mandated equipment, insurance, sta-
cy and benefits. But $23 million went toward increasingly generous service award plans, and many districts are proceed-
ing with major spending despite the economy.

Elmont, a community suffering one of Long Island's highest foreclosure rates, plans next
year to collect $3.5 million in fire district taxes, nearly a quar-
ter of its budget, for its services. Its budget has risen 47
percent in five years. And Syosset is putting away $800,000 in
2010; its budget has risen 45 percent and is Long Island's big-

Elmont Commissioner Andrew Bobeit said the district is
replacing its 10-year-old pumper. Syosset is replacing a
16-year-old ladder truck and doing renovations, a spokes-
man said.

NEXT PAGE

See what your district spends.

TOMORROW

A primer on Tuesday's elections.
Building boom?

With a pronounced public tendency to vote down firehouse bonds in recent years, the latest examples being Seaford, Lindenhurst and Cutchogue, there seems to remain a way for districts to build firehouses and buy trucks without asking taxpayers, experts say.

Under the law that governs the reserve funds, voters get to decide on this spending only if they present signatures of taxpayers representing 25 percent of the assessed valuation in the district. It’s never been done.

A look at recent reserve accounts tracked by the state comptroller shows Long Island fire districts continue to use those funds, rather than public bond votes, for most of their major capital spending.

The biggest nest eggs are $22.9 million held by the Brentwood Fire District — it’s setting aside another $700,000 next year. Franklin Square & Munson Fire District had piled up $8.2 million last year, and is putting another $550,000 in reserves next year. Overall, Long Island fire districts are accumulating more than $26 million in 2010.

Fire commissioners insist these funds are being spent more carefully than just a few years ago. Brentwood is buying trucks, expanding its headquarters and installing bunkrooms at four firehouses for overnight duty crews to speed responses, Commissioner Tom Richards said.

Thanks in part to financial training now required by the state for all commissioners, there’s more competitive bidding for trucks, said Holbrook Commissioner Michael Timo.

Service awards

Lobbyists for these pension-like benefits told lawmakers they would cost the average department no more than $7,000 to $10,000 a year for the first 20 years, and then become fully self-funded.

But the Length of Service Awards Program, a retirement beyond national standards, has wound up costing most Long Island fire districts much more. In 2010, New Hyde Park will pay $650,000 for its service awards benefit. Kings Park, $550,000; Hicksville, $350,000; and Selden, $250,000.

Response times: Who knows?

A Newsday analysis of more than 500,000 dispatch records obtained through the Freedom of Information Law found in 2005 that Long Island emergency services waited an average of 7 minutes, 40 seconds for a fire engine, and 8 minutes, 34 seconds for an ambulance — far longer than national standards.

Since then, some departments have claimed big improvements, but proof is hard to come by than ever.

Nassau has never tracked times for the calls it dispatches. And starting in 2005, Suffolk’s new fire commissioner, Joseph Williams, abandoned an annual response-time analysis that had been used to spur improvements, saying it was error-ridden.

A bill by Suffolk lawmakers to compel departments to submit real-time response data was gutted after heavy lobbying by volunteers. More recently, Williams acknowledged, he directed dispatchers to cease recording arrival times for many calls, saying their times might not be accurate.

But at a meeting this fall, the chairman of Suffolk’s Regional Emergency Medical Services Council suggested another reason why he didn’t know Suffolk’s average response times.

“I knew it today the Newsday syndrome,” said Ed Stapleton, director of pre-hospital education at Stony Brook Medical Center. “Everybody is paranoid that if numbers come out that our response time is too long, there is going to be this ugly picture of EMS in Suffolk County.”

The New York City Fire Department publishes its response times on its Web site.

Fewer junkets?

Maybe

After Newsday published a photo of Suffolk fire officials at the swim-up bar at a Bahamas resort junket, New York passed a law requiring officials to report and justify every trip out of state. But it’s a toothless law, with no provision for follow-up or enforcement.

The state’s Office of Fire Prevention and Control, which collects the reports, hasn’t received any reports of a Bahamas trip. The bad news: Since 2007 it has received reports from only 11 districts in Nassau and 24 in Suffolk. The state firefighter’s association is producing its members do a better job of reporting, a spokesman said.

Scott Thebold, president of the Suffolk County Fire Chiefs Council, which ran the Bahamas trip, said Newsday’s story helped him convince to a second term.

New York’s Fire Commissioner for Suffolk County, Executive Steve Levy four years ago eased out the health commissioner, the chainman of Suffolk’s Regional Emergency Medical Service.

Critics say it’s not a system at all, but a mismatched crazy- quilt of fieldpons that is falling behind the times.

This was part of the thinking behind state legislation this year, passed over firefighters’ bitter objections, making it easier to dissolve special districts. Judging from recent election results, the volunteers are holding their own in this debate.

Consider: At the urging of the volunteers, Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy four years ago eased out the health commissioner, the chair of Suffolk’s Regional Emergency Medical Service.

State health officials nixed that idea in August, but Levy’s embrace of the firefighters helped him cruise to a second term.

In Nassau, County Executive Thomas Suozzi and Comptroller Howard Weitzman were outspoken critics of the waste and inefficiency of special districts, and backed the state law that could ease consolidation or a county takeover of fire districts. Both were voted out last month, after angry firefighters organized behind Suozzi’s opponent, Edward Mangano.

In Gordon Heights, where sky-high fire taxes sparked a four-year taxpayer revolt seeking to dissolve the district, those residents are still waiting for Brookhaven to schedule hearings on their petitions.

With Stacey Alther
### 2010 budgets

<table>
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<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>2010 total budget</th>
<th>% change, 2005-2010 budgets</th>
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### ELECTION 2009

Chart below shows fire district budgets for 2010 and the percent change during the five-year period from 2005. Overall, Long Island’s fire districts have increased budgets by 25 percent during that time, far outpacing the inflation rate of 9 percent up to now. However, as the recession batters Long Island, more than 30 districts are reducing the amount they will raise in taxes next year.

Total budgets, Islandwide

$307,562,530

Average percentage increase 25%

Median percentage increase 23%

Compiled by Stacey Athers, Newsday Graphic/J. Stephen Smith
Holding their feet to the fire

BY ELIZABETH MOORE
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Terry Tietjen may have thought she was signing up for a standard-issue suburban NIMBY battle when she and other residents of Hicksville’s Ronald Avenue banded together several years ago to try to beat back plans to super-size a fire substation in their neighborhood.

Instead, that started an eye-opening six-year civic odyssey for Tietjen, a working mother of four who learned how difficult it is to stop a project when a fire district’s board of commissioners wants it to happen.

In this case, it would require a new majority on the five-member board whose loyalties lay with the broader community and not just the volunteer firefighters. That has proven an elusive goal in elections where typically fewer than 2 percent of residents cast ballots — mostly of them firefighters — and just one commissioner is up for re-election in any year.

“Most people in my community had no idea there is an annual election for fire commissioner every December in which they, as taxpayers and registered voters, are entitled to vote,” said Tietjen, who bowed out of her campaign for re-election just before the run-off election for fire commissioner last Sunday.

“I think most people in the community and not just Hicksville — had no idea that it was their civic responsibility to do this,” she said. “There’s the fire department, the police department, the town police, the school, the library. It’s all a community project, and they’re all elected by the people in the community.

“Not being familiar with the details on the ballot, that’s when you get people who come in and say, ‘I don’t want a fire station on that corner.’ So I think it’s a responsibility of people to be informed on the issues that affect their community.”

Their civic group planted itself in fire district meetings and filed reams of Freedom of Information Law requests and stirred up a community nucleus over a discovery in meeting minutes that commissioners had discussed condemning homes on Ronald Avenue to make room for parking for the bigger substation.

District officials said the expansion was needed for the safety and comfort of the volunteers.

Tietjen said the expansion was needed for the safety and comfort of the volunteers.

That led to a stream of civic association meetings, anonymous letters in residents’ mailboxes and neighborhood demonstrations, and, year after year, spilled unprecedented turnout in Hicksville’s fire elections that continues to this day.

Two commissioner candidates backed by Tietjen and her group managed to defeat advocates of the firehouse expansion, in 2003 and 2005.

The fire commission scaled back the expansion, expanded its voting hours and posted meeting minutes on its Web site and grew more responsive to public inquiries.

But two wins in six tries was not enough to claim the board majority needed to block the expansion, which has been built.

“The experience turned Tietjen into an outspoken advocate for special-district reform,” said Tietjen, who was urging state lawmakers to consider moving fire districts elections to Election Day. Meanwhile, she’s learning to live with the larger firehouse.

“Tietjen will skip this year’s fire district election. She has to be out of town Tuesday and the fire district does not issue absentee ballots.

But she has no regrets. “I think we made a difference,” she said. “And I have to say we have formed some wonderful friendships with people in the department.”

Laws for fire districts

Following are some state laws passed in the wake of the Fire Alarm series. Assemb. Robert Sweeney (D-Lindenhurst) wrote the legislation that was supported by fire service leaders. Most laws took effect Jan. 1, 2007.

- Giving notice

Tietjen advocated on behalf of her neighborhood to bring changes to the Hicksville Fire Department.

Holding hearings

Fire districts must hold hearings on budgets on the same day: the third Tuesday in October. This was in response to the practice in some districts of holding hearings on holiday weekends and other odd times.

- Transferring money

While fire districts can still transfer money from their operating budgets into reserve accounts to buy large equipment or for building renovations, they must first get voter approval to set up the fund and to spend the money on the purchase.

- Providing oversight

More oversight through independent auditing and a requirement to develop a code of ethics that explains the bidding process, among other items.

- Getting training

Mandatory financial training for newly elected fire commissioners. — STACEY ALTHEIR.