Town: Gordon Heights should merge EMS services with Medford

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Phil Kouwe of Emergency Management Consultants International, below right, listens as supporters of the Gordon Heights Fire District cheer during a public comment meeting in March at Brookhaven Town Hall.

In order to reduce the highest fire tax rate in Suffolk County, Brookhaven Town officials are recommending the Gordon Heights Fire Commission merge with Medford’s ambulance district, town officials confirmed this week.

The historic Gordon Heights Fire District — which established the state’s first all-black fire department nearly 60 years ago — provides emergency services to a population of 2,201 residents in an area of about 2 square miles and has a current tax rate of $60.83 per $100 of assessed value of a property. (In comparison, neighboring Coram Fire District has the second highest fire tax rate in the town at $32.22 per hundred.)

Assessed value of a property should not to be confused with the actual value. For example, if a property on Granny Road in Gordon Heights is assessed at $2,700, the homeowner will pay $1,642 in fire taxes per year.

According to the town’s Gordon Heights Fire District Feasibility Study, about $32.59 of the GHFD total tax rate is used to support the emergency medical services for the community.

But if there was an EMS consolidation between Gordon Heights and the Medford Volunteer Ambulance Company — an ambulance district with an $8.07 tax rate — Medford residents would see a $1.56 per $100 increase and the Gordon Heights tax rate would decrease by $15.77, according to the study.

Rosalie Hanson, the Gordon Heights resident who led the dissolution petition effort, said she’s in favor of the town’s recommendation.

“This is the happy compromise for everybody,” Ms. Hanson said, adding she hopes a solution to the high fire tax issue will be implemented in time to impact the 2011-2012 tax bill.
Brian Beedenbender, Supervisor Mark Lesko’s chief of staff, said a Tuesday meeting with the commission to discuss the town’s proposal was cancelled at Gordon Heights Fire Commission Chairman James Kelly’s request.

A voicemail message left at the district office Thursday requesting comment from Mr. Kelly was not returned.

Mr. Beedenbender said the meeting has been rescheduled for July 14. The Town Board could announce details on how it plans to proceed on the fire tax issue following that meeting, he said.

“We’ve had very positive and productive meetings with the commission and now we’re all trying to settle on the specifics in order to give Gordon Heights residents the fire protection they need at the lowest possible tax rate,” Mr. Beedenbender said.

Fire taxes for Gordon Heights residents are high because the 900-home community has no commercial revenue and is not sufficiently supported by property valuation. The area is plagued with foreclosed properties and many houses — such as sober homes and sex offender housing — are tax exempt.

Unlike the need for a mutual agreement for fire districts to merge, the Town Board has the authority to establish or expand ambulance districts.

Consultants have said this was not their preferred option because Medford Volunteer Ambulance Company officials believe they couldn’t absorb the additional EMS workload. While the number of EMS calls are on the rise across the country, it’s “nearly double the national average” in Gordon Heights, consultants said.

The GHFD responded to 605 EMS incidents in 2009. Of those incidents, 155 were mutual aid responses to neighboring areas, according to the study. The average cost of EMS incidents in Gordon Heights is about $1,250. In comparison, Medford Ambulance — which had about 1,415 more EMS calls than the GHFD in 2009 — has an EMS rate of about $580 per incident, the study shows.

The town also floated the idea of the Gordon Heights neighborhood starting its own ambulance district, although no details were immediately available as to how such a plan could save money.

Consultants have also suggested the Town Board pursue two other options: Continue to let the GHFD operate, but with enhanced financial oversight by Brookhaven Town; or dissolve the GHFD and create a Fire Protection District, a scenario in which the town would contract services to another provider.

A third option to dissolve the district and merge it with neighboring fire districts in Coram, Middle Island, Yaphank or Medford is currently off the table because response times would increase by an average of 2 minutes, 46 seconds, Mr. Beedenbender said.

“From a public safety stand point, that’s not an option,” he said.