PART III. RECOMMENDATIONS

*Decision makers must minimize the [adverse] consequences of emergencies by aligning fire department resources with community risks/hazards* (Urban Fire Forum, p. 11).

Chapter 6. TRENDS and PROJECTIONS AFFECTING FIRE PROTECTION

The volunteer staffing decline expressed to Mendon Town Supervisor, John Moffitt by our Department Chiefs is not unique to us, our neighboring communities, our region, New York State or the nation. Our experience is documented in previous chapters, echoed by others and chronicled throughout a literature review.

*From 1998 to 2021, the number of volunteer firefighters in New York decreased from 110,000 to 75,000, a 31% drop. More than three-quarters of volunteer fire departments have fewer firefighters than they did two decades ago. During that same period, calls increased by 29%. John D’Alessandro, secretary of FASNY, told THE CITIZEN that the complexity of the calls is also increasing and there are other demands for service. ‘While all those things are happening, we’re being asked to address it with less and less people... .’ Riley Shurtleff, Cayuga County Emergency Services Director…explained that the decreasing number of volunteer firefighters occurred ‘as economic changes and social model shifts have caused many people to be less inclined to serve their communities at all, let alone for no pay as a volunteer in a position that is both physically and emotionally taxing’ “* (Harding, D & C. 1.21.23).

The trends described in this newspaper article are not new, but they are severely impacting most volunteer Departments across New York State, to the point “…wherein the lack of capacity is affecting emergency response capabilities. Today, volunteer fire departments are struggling to recruit new members and retain existing ones, a challenge further compounded by increased operational responsibilities beyond fire protection to include vehicle accidents, medical emergencies, hazardous material spills, and weather-related rescue operations. The training necessary to safely and effectively perform these responsibilities has increased as has the time commitments expected of a volunteer. …The lack of available volunteer firefighters across the state has real public safety impacts - jeopardizing the protection of people and property in our local communities. Many fire departments across New York State are struggling to maintain minimum staffing levels and are routinely relying upon mutual aid assistance to respond to emergencies safely and effectively.” (NYSHSES, 12/2022, p. 3).

There is familiarity with trends and projections affecting fire protection whether they are expressed and/or “studied” at a national, state, regional, county or local level. Fire Fighter associations, state departments, think tanks and other organizations advocate for various aspects of concern, revealing there is no “one size fits all” or single overlay solution. However, there are opportunities for assistance to improve staffing, address financial challenges and streamline administration. Committee members are familiar with many of the “improvement” initiatives suggested by these entities. Among these practices are those already visible within our Departments and utilized by the Town, the Village and the Fire District:

* Mutual Aid/Mutual Assistance (automatic dispatch)
* Monroe County delivery of NYS Fire Training Courses and Inter-Department training sessions
* Firefighter recruitment and retention benefits, incentives and programs, i.e. Town and Village property tax exemptions; Personal Federal tax credits; the LOSAP Program
* Multiple grant opportunities from national, state and private sector sources
* Compatible equipment purchases
* Volunteer duty shift assignments
* Paid, civilian employees for weekday assistance
* Community activities to engage the public and promote awareness of local service.

Yet, *…volunteer fire departments* [struggle] *to provide the same level of service with fewer volunteers.* [And, they and their Officials] *must balance the increased cost and need to maintain an appropriate, level service with the public’s expectation of service and cost. Many fire departments are facing a crossroad and should take a systematic approach to determining what is best for the public.*

*Exploration of consolidation and shared services may prove beneficial to identifying efficacies while assuring the delivery of quality service. Consolidation and shared services offer opportunities to increase cost-effectiveness by eliminating unnecessary and costly duplication of resources, maximize use of limited personnel, and improve response times while maintaining the efficient and effective delivery of services* (NYSHSES, 12/2022, p. 11).

Figure 6-1. is a reprint of *TABLE 3* of Parshall’s Report (pp. 29-30). We use it to “summarize...fire district consolidation and fire protection [across New York State]. Most of these studies review the baseline of existing service delivery and consider a range of options from shared services (operational consolidation) to full, structural consolidation involving the consolidation and/or dissolution of fire districts. Such studies…typically identify the potential savings and pitfalls of a range of alternative service delivery options” (Parshall, p.28).

If we look at the governance of Fire Protection within Monroe County, Figure 6-2. reveals:

* 23 Fire Districts - one of which is a Joint Fire District (Wheatland-Scottsville);
* 4 Municipal Departments (HFFD among them); and,
* 5 Fire Protection Districts (not including Mendon Fire Protection District #1).

A closer review of governance and administrative changes in Monroe County is provided in Parshall’s Report:

“Ridge Culver Fire District.

“In 2019, the Center for Governmental Research (CGR) performed a consolidation study

for the five fire districts serving the Town of Irondequoit. Among the various options

considered was maintaining the status quo, creating a single fire district, the creation

of two fire districts, or the creation of multiple fire districts (including the merger

of Ridge Culver and Laurelton). The adjacency and mutual aid agreements of Ridge

Culver and Laurelton had led to multiple consolidation conversations over the years.

Both districts relied on a blend of paid and volunteer firefighters and were confronting

similar challenges with fewer volunteers, declining assessed property values, and an

aging membership. In 2022, both fire district boards enacted resolutions to make the

consolidation official. The creation of the new Irondequoit Fire District is anticipated

to result in 5 percent reduction in the aggregate operational budgets of the former FDs

(saving $1.9 million in FY 2023) and is anticipated to lower taxes for the residents

of both former districts. Other advantages identified included a larger combined fund balance, reduced insurance and liability costs, reduced personnel and administrative costs, and greater decision-making efficiency for the area served” (p. 34).

“Town of Brighton.

“Fire protection services for the West Brighton Fire Protection District (WBFPD) had been the subject of multiple studies in 1993, 2001, and 2002. In 2009, Brighton received [a Local Government Efficiency, LGE]…grant from the state for additional study. The studies had flagged the rising costs, declining number of volunteers, and resulting dysfunction of the volunteer-based West Brighton Fire Department (WBFD). In 2011, when the town renegotiated with the WBFD, the contract stipulated that upon the contract’s expiration, equipment and cash reserves of the department would transfer to the town. The WBFD challenged the contract as invalid, setting off what would be a years-long legal dispute between the town and fire department over money and control of apparatus/access to the station house.

“In 2012, the Town of Brighton terminated its contract with the WFBD as the primary services provider for the WBFPD (the protection district), opting instead to enter into an arrangement with the Rochester Fire Department (RFD). The arrangement added to the frictions with the WBFD, as volunteer firefighters, wishing to continue their service to their community, clashed with staffing of West Brighton station houses with full-time paid firefighters. In support, the WBFD citizens initiated a referendum to dissolve the WBFPD that was approved by a margin of 459-78 on August 28, 2012. While the dissolution vote did not negate the contract with the RFD, it forced the town to reconsider fire protection services for the WBFPD. In February 2013, the town amended and approved a dissolution plan for the eventual dissolution of the WBFPD,

with services being taken over by the adjacent Henrietta Fire District (HFD). However, implementation of the plan was stymied by the ongoing legal wrangling between the WBFD and the town, which only concluded in 2019 when the courts upheld the dissolution of the fire department under the Not-For-Profit Law.

“The consolidation of the WBFPD and HFD was finally implemented effective January 1, 2022, by action of the town board (dissolving the West Brighton Fire Protection District) and by resolution of the board of the Henrietta Fire District (expanding the boundaries to include the area of the former protection district). The expansion and growth of the HFD necessitated the hiring of additional paid firefighters to service the area. The former West Brighton Fire Protection District Station 2 is now Henrietta Fire District Station 7” (p. 35).

“Hamlin Fire District.

“In 2013, the Town of Hamlin (Monroe County) consolidated three fire districts (FDs) into one, merging the former Hamlin, Morton, and Walker Fire Districts into the Hamlin Morton Walker Fire District. The consolidation was undertaken following a study conducted by the Rochester-based consulting firm, the Center for Governmental Research (CGR). The three voluntary fire departments that contracted with the former districts were not, however, dissolved or consolidated—as incorporated fire companies, they each retain their own officers, conduct separate meetings, and engage in separate fundraising activities. Follow-up reporting indicates that consolidation aided in necessary station house renovations, bolstered the recruitment and retention of volunteers, and inspired interest from neighboring fire districts. In addition to the original study grant (2009), the Hamlin Fire District was awarded $321,595 to assist in the implementation of the merger and to maximize tax payer savings” (p.37).

Wheatland-Scottsville Joint Fire District.

The Wheatland-Scottsville Joint Fire District was created on August 4, 2020 by the Wheatland Town Board and the Village of Scottsville Board of Trustees.

*There was consideration and a report conducted in 2009, a special advisory committee report in 2013 and the current 2019-2020 planning sessions. All these activities were driven by the concern in volunteer recruitment, increased costs of doing business and a long-range perspective of how to continue to provide service locally. In our Town and in our Village, one must also determine what is a reasonable response time to any emergency event whether it be fire or medical. The question became, how can we best continue to take care of ourselves in the most appropriate manner?*

*It was determined that we have the positive opportunity to continue to provide local service, with local volunteers, paid for by the same people who currently pay for the service. The only change is administrative. The current debt will eventually be transferred to the newly created district and out of the Village budget, the debt remains paid for by the same people as now, the equipment which was paid for by the same people is turned over to the district to serve the same people, the clerical services paid to the Village front office is instead paid to a district treasurer/secretary. Again, merely a ‘redesign’ and not a fundamental change. There is no impact on service delivery.*

*The newly created district answers directly to the people of the Village and people of the current Wheatland Fire Protection District without going through the Village government as is currently the process. The residents served by the joint district will vote on commissioners who develop the budget and plan for future needs.*

*Historically, fire departments across New York State are moving to the district model and not remaining under Villages. It is anticipated that the proposed joint district will provide increased accountability to the public, will be more transparent to the taxpayer (currently is within the Village budget and bills), is required to be audited by NYS annually (is not true in the current design), and better enable planning for the future* (Dobson, 8.4.20, pp. 1-3).

NOTE: All Legal Notices and Public Hearings regarding the creation of this Joint Fire District are available in The Sentinel archives.

Both HFFD and MEND engage Mutual Aid Departments outside of Monroe County:

Town of Avon Fire District (Livingston County)…was created by the Town of Avon and changed the jurisdiction of previous service under contract from the Village of Avon, and a Fire Protection District with the East Avon Fire Department.

“Town of Victor (Ontario County).

“The Town of Victor had received an LGE grant in 2015 to fund a review of EMS and fire

services in the village. Fire service protection was provided by the Village of Victor

Municipal Fire Department, which covered the village as well as town-outside-of village

territory through the Victor Fire Protection District. The Fishers Fire District (operating out of two station houses) covered other areas of the town.

“A proposal to create a joint town-village fire district was launched in 2017, attempting to build off the existing service sharing and joint purchase of equipment. The consolidation would have assisted in the recruitment of volunteers and equalized the tax assessments within the new district. In 2018, the board of commissioners of the Fishers Fire District voted against the merger, leaving the town and village in talks over a joint town-village fire district. While the town board and supervisor expressed support, the village board and residents (who would have faced higher taxes) remained skeptical. The dissolution of the Village of Victor Fire Department and creation of the joint district was put to a referendum and approved by village voters, 210–94” (Parshall, p. 36).

“Regardless of the mechanisms or means, in order to continue to safely and effectively protect the communities it serves, the volunteer fire service of New York State must continue to evolve to address its staffing challenges” (NYSHSES, p. 13).

The cases cited in this chapter reflect affirmative actions by local Elected Officials and Fire Departments to create opportunities for delivering and sustaining Fire Protection services in their communities. Local people taking local actions to best suit and serve local needs.

2.7.23