

Fire consolidation report full of inaccuracies

By BOB BERNSTEIN

Last week a five-alarm fire swept through a half block of stores along East Post Road in White Plains. Firefighters from throughout the region, including Greenville, Hartsdale, Fairview and Scarsdale joined forces to battle the blaze. More than 30 firefighters were injured, including three from Greenville.

We would never think to charge White Plains for the use of Greenville's services in an emergency; nor would White Plains charge us should we need their aid.

Yet that's precisely the wrongheaded thinking behind the two-man finance subcommittee of Paul Feiner's Fire Consolidation Commission, which last week distributed to its members a confidential report "for discussion purposes only" recommending, after 10 months of study, that the Greenville Fire District be consolidated with the Hartsdale and Fairview fire districts.

The Edgemont Community Council and the Greenville Fire District commissioners last year opposed consolidation of the fire districts and decided after careful review not to participate in the consolidation commission because preliminary analyses by both groups showed that while lowering taxes in the other two districts, consolidation would result in an immediate 21 percent hike in Edgemont's fire taxes. At an average assessment in Edgemont of \$30,000, that would translate to an annual increase of about \$600.

We argued that Greenburgh would be better off cutting bloated town spending. Town taxes in Edgemont have risen more than 55 percent in five years.

Significantly, the finance subcommittee agrees with our assessment that consolidation would be costly to Edgemont, but they're OK with that. According to the draft report, Greenville is "understaffed" because it relies too heavily on automatic aid from Hartsdale at Hartsdale's expense. So, even if consolidation means a 21 percent tax hike for Edgemont residents, they say it's "justified."

In fact, Greenville is not understaffed. It has 30 career firefighters and 22 volunteers, for a total of 52 firefighters serving a population of 8,500, while Hartsdale has 37 career firefighters and 12 volunteers, for a total of 49, serving a population of 9,800. Greenville not only responds to fires, it also provides EMS services; Hartsdale generally doesn't do that. Furthermore, Greenville responds to calls on the Sprain Brook Parkway in Hartsdale, while Hartsdale does not. These facts are not mentioned in the subcommittee's draft report.

Nor is Greenville in any way subsidized by Hartsdale (or any other fire district). The draft says that in 2008, Greenville received automatic aid from Hartsdale four times as often as Hartsdale received aid from Greenville and that as much as 19 percent of Hartsdale's calls that year were to answer calls from Greenville, whereas only 4 percent of Greenville's calls were for automatic aid to Hartsdale. So, they say, if you multiply 19 percent by the amount that Hartsdale residents pay in taxes for their fire district in 2010 (and do the corresponding calculation for Greenville), you get a net figure of \$1.458 million which, if charged back to Greenville, would increase Edgemont's fire taxes by 20.3 percent. This, they state, "would be justified given the level of understaffing."

This is nonsense. Unlike mutual aid,

which is what occurs when firemen at the scene of a fire call for additional help, automatic aid is a set of protocols agreed to in advance by neighboring fire chiefs to respond immediately to certain types of alarms out-of-district with preset levels of personnel and apparatus.

Automatic aid provided to neighboring communities doesn't cost Hartsdale taxpayers anything other than the cost of gasoline and wear and tear on its apparatus, a small price to pay should Hartsdale ever need automatic aid.

The reason is that at least 80 percent of the costs of maintaining a fire district are manpower costs. If Hartsdale were to cease providing automatic aid to Greenville and other communities, its out-of-pocket labor costs would not change. Instead of responding to an emergency when a quick response could mean the difference between life and death, its men would just stay put in their firehouses — and get paid the same regardless. From a financial and public safety point of view, that's just insane.

In 1999, during the last major recession, fire departments across the country settled on targeted use of automatic aid as the best and most economically ef-

And the irony doesn't stop there. The draft assures Edgemont residents that the hike in their taxes might not actually be as high as 21 percent because once consolidated, the new district can be expected to adopt better business practices. Even if that were true, the practices it recommends, such as the use of an automatic county dispatch system and less generous pension benefits, have already been in place in Greenville for years, which is another reason why Greenville's costs are lower than in neighboring districts.

Another huge error in their report is an "analysis" that purports to show that the average firefighter in the three districts earns substantially more than their peers in other places, which at first glance appears to be rather shocking. But Polit and Goldstein again got their facts wrong.

Because Greenville uses straight time "overtime" to cover empty slots, the dollars paid to one man may be higher in a given year, but the bottom line is much lower: The wages paid to a current employee vs. hiring another one are a wash, but the benefit costs associated with covering these slots is zero.

In 2009, when Greenville had four open slots, if no additional hours were

engaged in "pension padding" by receiving a disproportionate amount of overtime during their final year of employment prior to retirement in Fairview and Hartsdale. (Greenville doesn't have as much of a problem because its pensions are not calculated based on earnings in the last year of employment.)

Although the draft report suggests these retired firefighters are ripping off taxpayers, the report fails to mention that conduct described is not illegal. Some in Albany are suggesting pension reforms that would curb the practice but consolidation would have no effect whatsoever.

Similarly, the report charges that nepotism exists in the fire districts, particularly in Hartsdale and Fairview. Here too, the report gratuitously names names. However, no one can obtain a firefighter's job without first passing a civil service exam and meeting certain other requirements, a fact which the report never mentions. Instead, the draft conveys through innuendo the false and misleading impression that because some members of the same family choose to work in our communities as firefighters, which is not uncommon, that there must be something wrong with that, when in fact there isn't.

The finance subcommittee also says that consolidation is necessary because of declining assessments and tax certioraris. However, the report nowhere explains how these factors would change under consolidation. Furthermore, assessments are declining faster in Hartsdale and Fairview than they are in Edgemont, which means that over time, if consolidation were to occur, we would be covering an even greater share of their tax burden. The report doesn't mention that either.

Space doesn't permit a complete listing of all the report's major errors. Among other things, the draft overlooks the impact of the loss of local control that consolidation would have, and omits mention of evidence that consolidation in other communities has resulted in a substantial loss of volunteers and a need for paid manpower to replace them.

The commissioners will be meeting at 7 p.m. on Thursday, July 22, at Greenburgh Town Hall to discuss the Polit-Goldstein report and vote on recommending consolidation. The meeting is open to the public, but commission members voted 8-2 at its last meeting to go into executive session (unlawfully, I might add) so they may discuss the report in secret. To his credit, Hartsdale fire Chief Ed Rush, a commission member, said he would not participate.

Once the vote takes place, the commission plans on releasing its final report Aug. 8. If consolidation is recommended, we will likely see petition drives later this summer in all three districts to get the measure on the ballot.

I urge every Edgemont resident to read the data, compare the tax hikes, review the facts and make an informed educated decision not to sign a petition to put consolidation of the Greenville Fire District on the ballot, and if it does get on the ballot, to oppose it and tell your neighbors to oppose it. Consolidation is not in Edgemont's interest financially or as a matter of public safety and it certainly isn't warranted by any "study" done by Feiner's consolidation commission.

Bob Bernstein is president of the Edgemont Community Council.

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ficient way to improve public safety in their own and neighboring communities because it can dramatically improve response times in the early stages of a fire and it generally comes at no extra cost to taxpayers. Property and casualty underwriters consider automatic aid in setting fire protection rating standards, which keeps fire insurance rates low and, in turn, saves taxpayers money.

Indeed, Greenville has been a pioneer locally with Hartsdale in developing a sound automatic aid program devised by fire professionals, not politicians, which makes it all the more ironic that, rather than praising Greenville for its innovative leadership, the subcommittee attacks Greenville for doing exactly that.

None of this is discussed in the draft report.

When I tried to bring this misunderstanding of automatic aid to the attention of the commission, finance co-chairman Mike Goldstein asked me to stop contacting him and the other author of the finance subcommittee report, Luis Polit, refused to allow me to see the draft. Commission chairman Alan Hochberg, meanwhile, who last fall assured Edgemont residents that they had "nothing to fear" from Feiner's commission, lavished praise on Polit and Goldstein for their "extensive research." And commission member Milt Hoffman, author of a biased subcommittee report of his own on fire personnel, accused me of being "confrontational" and asked to be taken off my e-mail list.

So much for dialogue among a "commission" that, I've now concluded, was politically driven by Feiner and was never about an open and frank exchange of ideas that I was assured it would be when I agreed 10 months ago to serve as an official adviser and start attending their meetings.

offered to current employees at straight time, Greenville would have had to hire eight additional firefighters and two more captains to maintain current manning levels. Although there was no impact on wages paid, the savings in benefits by doing it Greenville's way saved Greenville taxpayers around \$700,000 in 2009 alone.

So, yes, the average amount paid to a Greenville firefighter in a given year may be higher, but Polit and Goldstein never make any effort to understand why.

Hochberg, Polit, Goldstein and Hoffman clearly do not want a fair and balanced report. Nor do they care much for accuracy. At their urging, the commission voted last month 8-2 to bar me from receiving a copy of the draft report after I said I didn't think it was legal to keep confidential a draft report based on public information that we were responsible for vetting for fairness and accuracy.

Thus, when the draft was distributed last week, it was accompanied by an e-mail from Hochberg, who has his own office in town hall as Feiner's "assistant town supervisor," stating that the report wasn't being sent to me because Polit and Goldstein "felt it should not be released to unknown people to the committee."

Hochberg added that "[s]ince this report mentions names of individuals and certain specific findings dealing with personnel issues and it is a work in progress it should not be released to the public until the full commission can examine the document and if there are errors based on factual evidence then corrections can be made at our July 22d meeting."

Hochberg is right in that the draft names names. In fact, it gratuitously slanders many current and former firefighters and fire commissioners for no reason, in my judgment. For example, the report suggests that certain retired firefighters