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Report recommends study to merge volunteer fire departments

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Volunteer fire companies in Erie County should examine ways to consolidate, a study made

public Wednesday recommends.

"Taxpayers deserve nothing less than the maximum value for their public service dollar,"

says the report completed by County Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz's auditors. "A thoughtful,

considered analysis can potentially yield considerable savings."

Some towns are congested with departments. Amherst has 10, the report said. So does

Cheektowaga. Hamburg has nine.

Many of Erie County's 98 fire companies began operating under a system designed decades

ago, when fire departments sprang up to protect communities that have since lost population or

to protect factories that in some cases no longer operate today, Poloncarz said.

"We are basically relying on a system which was created in the horse and buggy days," he

said.

Poloncarz suggested that county government, which provides training opportunities for

firefighters and coordinates emergency services and communications, apply for a grant to

finance a consolidation study.

But with residents and volunteers emotionally invested in their fire companies, would consolidation ever materialize?

Larry Nieciepozeski, president of the Harris Hill Fire Company in Clarence, said his company "would have no problem" with a study but said the volunteers will quit firefighting

altogether if their fire hall ever closed.

"They've had their own domain for 50, 60 years," said Nieciepozeski, a Harris Hill volunteer for 30 years. "They're not going to give it up for some politician."

Another fire official said that a study, if done, should be undertaken by someone who has

"walked the walk."

"People don't really understand how involved the [fire] service is," said Edward Kulpa,

president of the Bowmansville Fire District. "They look at the bottom line. But these volunteers put in hundreds and hundreds of hours of training for something they don't get a

penny for. And they don't want a penny. They just want to be of service."

County Executive Chris Collins would have to go along in order to implement Poloncarz's

suggestion that county government initiate a study. But Collins indicated Wednesday he sees no

need for such a step.

In a letter he's planning to send fire chiefs, he says he worries about the threat to public safety.

"Not only do I believe this is a foolish suggestion made in large part to generate headlines," he writes, "but more importantly I believe it will threaten public safety, reduce response times and increase taxes long-term on residents throughout Erie County.

"I do not see any logical benefit in consolidating fire companies. Such a consolidation, especially if not handled properly, could lengthen response times and jeopardize public safety."

Erie County's taxpayers provide some \$130 million a year to support 98 fire companies running 155 fire stations. Most of that money — \$77 million — goes to support the Buffalo Fire Department, the report said.

However, \$46.5 million goes to Erie County's volunteer fire companies, largely to support their equipment and property because their ranks are unpaid. Volunteer fire companies usually

draw contracts with town governments to provide fire protection, and the town governments then

raise the money to pay for the service through property taxes. The report found a smattering

of local fire companies fail to file with the Internal Revenue Service the annual reports

required of nonprofits.

The auditors, after interviewing fire chiefs, said they found volunteers are becoming harder to find. There is significant overlap in fire company territories in the inner-ring

suburbs, and less so in the county's outer reaches, the auditors said, suggesting the time is

ripe to refigure the boundaries.

"Fewer districts, covering a larger area, would use less very expensive equipment

more

effectively," the report said, but added, "it is difficult to quantify how much could be saved. Such a figure depends heavily on the number of [and which] districts would be consolidated."

Poloncarz called volunteer fire companies the third rail of local politics.

"I know this report will not be well received in some circles," he said. "I was advised by

some members of the community not to pursue it because it would not be a politically wise

thing to do. However, we are not elected to make the politically popular decisions but the

right decisions for our constituents."

New York's commission on government consolidation, named for former Lt. Gov. Stan Lundine,

also has questioned the number of fire districts in the state and suggested a study to whittle

the number down. However, after the State Legislature approved a law to make it easier to

consolidate or dismantle local governments and special taxing districts, a bill was introduced

to protect New York's fire districts from consolidation. That bill has yet to become law.

News Staff Reporter Niki Cervantes contributed to this report.

Comments

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