



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Senator O'Mara's weekly column ~ for the week of September 21, 2020 ~ 'Responding for the sake of our first responders'

THOMAS F. O'MARA September 21, 2020

| ISSUE: **FIRST RESPONDERS**



We simply can't do enough to thank first responders throughout the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes for their outstanding commitment, day in and day out, night after night, to save lives, protect property, and strengthen the quality of the area's cities, towns and villages in many ways.

Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature, as well as on legislative actions, local initiatives, state programs and policies, and more. Stop back every Monday for Senator O'Mara's latest column...

This week, "Responding for the sake of our first responders"

Our recent observance of the 19th anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks reminded us, once more, of the remarkable service and sacrifice of our firefighters, police officers, and all first responders.

We paid tribute, again, to the amazing bravery, courage, and selflessness of the firefighters and police officers, every first responder and every citizen who gave their lives on 9/11.

That day continues to mark the essence of why these men and women earn our enduring respect – and why the fire service is one of society's highest callings.

Together with area Assemblyman Phil Palmesano, I recently joined firefighters and other leaders in the city of Corning to get a firsthand look at the city's new front-line engine. The new vehicle was put into service in May to replace an aging, 30-year-old engine and enhance firefighting and first response capabilities for the department's service district and the neighboring volunteer fire departments it helps support.

We were grateful to be able to secure state funding to help the city and local taxpayers offset approximately two-thirds of the cost of the new engine, and this was our first chance to get a close-up look. Phil and I are very proud of the significant financial support we have been able to provide for many fire departments (volunteer and paid) and police departments across the districts we represent in order to assist them in keeping up their equipment so they can most effectively protect and serve our communities.

According to Corning Fire Chief Brad Davies, Corning's front-line engine responds to over 1,500 service calls annually, including structure fires, automobile accidents, medical emergencies, and HAZMAT incidents.

Corning Mayor Bill Boland called it "a major piece of equipment for our fire department" and said that the state assistance "means a significant savings to the local taxpayer."

City Manager Mark Ryckman praised city employees for "an excellent job developing the specifications for the truck and finalizing the project within budget."

In other words, it was a collaborative state-local effort to strengthen a foundation of the local community.

We are always grateful to be able to help regional fire and police departments in Corning, Bath, Elmira, Hornell and across this region upgrade vehicles and equipment to better serve their communities, help ease the burden on local property taxpayers, and enhance the personal safety of our firefighters, police officers, and all first responders.

We simply can't do enough to thank first responders throughout the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes for their outstanding commitment, day in and day out, night after night, to save lives, protect property, and strengthen the quality of the area's cities, towns and villages in many ways.

It's also critical that we continue to recognize the many challenges they face. Chief among these challenges remains recruitment and retention for our volunteer fire departments, especially in rural areas.

Keep in mind what's on the line. A 2016 study from the Firemen's Association of the State of New York (FASNY), "Tax Savings and Economic Value of Volunteer Firefighters in New York," found that the state's volunteer firefighters save taxpayers more than \$3 billion annually.

For regional counties, the 2106 FASNY study estimated that the property tax increases that would result from moving from volunteer to all-paid fire services would be enormous: Chemung (33.8% increase), Schuyler (36.1%), Steuben (40.3%), Tioga (48%), Tompkins (45.4%) and Yates (33.8%).

In addition to other efforts, it's the reason that I have sponsored, again in partnership with Assemblyman Palmesano and Assemblyman Chris Friend, legislation known as the "Omnibus Emergency Services Volunteer Incentive Act" to provide a series of tax and other incentives to help address the recruitment and retention challenge. We see this legislation as part of ongoing state-level efforts by FASNY and others to keep drawing attention to this need.

The challenge of recruiting and retaining volunteer firefighters and EMTs, especially in rural, upstate communities, deserves the attention. Keeping our corps of emergency services volunteers strong has to be a statewide priority. Our volunteer fire departments have long been the foundation of public safety and security, and the center of community service and civic pride.

We can't risk their decline. We need to keep sounding the alarm. In addition to the consequences for the safety and well-being of our communities, the economic impact of losing volunteer emergency services would be devastating.