



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' ~ for the week of November 16, 2020 ~ 'Sounding the alarm on volunteer recruitment'

THOMAS F. O'MARA November 16, 2020

| ISSUE: **VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS**



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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, "Sounding the alarm on volunteer recruitment"

Firemen's Association of the State of New York President John Farrell said last week, "There has been an alarming decrease in the number of volunteer firefighters in New York State in recent years."

He noted this challenge following the enactment of a new law creating a state-level Volunteer Fire Fighter Recruitment and Retention Task Force. Under the law, which the Senate unanimously approved in July, the state Office of Fire Prevention and Control will guide the task force's examination of the recruitment and retention challenge. The task force will issue policy recommendations for future action by the Legislature, which should include, in my view, addressing the overbearing training requirements for even the most basic level to be a volunteer firefighter.

I look forward to closely monitoring this task force. It will be among the most important work getting underway in state government in 2021.

It's a challenge -- and a potential crisis -- that I've long highlighted and joined together with other Upstate legislators to sponsor legislation to address.

I wholeheartedly agree on the fundamental importance of our volunteer firefighters, who play a central role in so many communities across the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions.

As I've said many times before, the challenge of recruiting volunteer firefighters and EMTs, especially in our rural, upstate communities, deserves all of the attention it gets. 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. It's a challenge that we need to keep working on and raising awareness about because in addition to public safety, the economic impact of volunteer emergency services to communities is enormous.

Nearly 90 percent of New York's municipalities are protected by volunteer firefighters.

According to FASNY, "Volunteer firefighters are most prevalent in smaller, suburban and rural communities that have a lesser tax base than larger towns and cities."

FASNY released an important economic impact study several years ago that remains relevant to this discussion going forward. Among numerous findings, this one was particularly alarming (and not new): it would cost local communities and local property taxpayers statewide more than \$3 billion to replace volunteer fire departments with all-paid fire services.

In other words, the continued diminishment of volunteer firefighter ranks and volunteer ambulance personnel would be devastating to already overburdened local property taxpayers.

I'll zero in on just one of the findings from the FASNY study, "Tax Savings and Economic Value of Volunteer Firefighters in New York." Replacing volunteer departments with all-paid squads would result in county property tax increases averaging 26.5% statewide. For regional counties, the increases would be much higher than the statewide average: Chemung (33.8%), Schuyler (36.1%), Steuben (40.3%), Tioga (48%), Tompkins (45.4%) and Yates (33.8%).

New York government faces daunting economic and fiscal obstacles as a result of COVID-19, as well as challenges in our schools, in maintaining local roads and bridges, water infrastructure, and many more.

Nevertheless, our long-term focus must include the recruitment and retention of volunteer emergency services personnel.

While it's true that there are factors outside of government's influence that contribute to declining ranks, there are also actions that government can and should take to help reverse it.

Hopefully the new Recruitment and Retention Task Force will jumpstart the Legislature's movement on necessary actions.

Volunteer firefighters make great sacrifices to protect the health, safety, and well-being of lives and property. These fire departments are cornerstones of so many communities.

We cannot risk their decline.