

Testimony of Robert H. Fickies, before the  
Commission on Local Government Efficiency and Competitiveness  
June 13, 2007  
Saratoga Springs, NY

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address this commission today. I speak as a man with more than 30 years experience as a volunteer firefighter, and 15 years of service as a commissioner of a rural New York State fire district. I also have 30 years of service to the people of New York State as a state geologist with the New York State Geological Survey.

The volunteer fire service in the state goes back to the bucket brigades of colonial times. As small villages formed, groups of citizens pledged to protect the community from the ravages of fire. Most volunteer fire companies predate by many decades the fire districts they are now governed by.

The fire district system was established in the 1932, by the state legislature as a means of insuring adequate fire protection throughout the state. Some 800 fire districts were established, primarily around the existing volunteer companies, which were originally established to protect rural villages with horse drawn apparatus.

From my perspective, as a small town Fire Commissioner in upstate New York, the time has come to reevaluate the Fire District / Fire Company system in light of the myriad of changes that have taken place in the last 75 years. That is, changes in fire fighting technology, changes in mandated health, safety, and training requirements for firefighters, changes in the services that “firefighters” are expected to provide the community. Also, major increases in population in some counties, and major commercial development necessitate this reevaluation.

Please don't misunderstand me – the Fire-District system works -- it works well !  
Can it work more efficiently? Yes. Can taxpayer dollars be saved? Yes.

Let me cite an example from my own experience in Rensselaer County. I live in a town with a population of about 8,000. Within the town are 3 fire-districts, each governing one volunteer fire company. Each of these fire districts is mandated to provide adequate fire protection to its citizens. As a result of this mandate, the town has more pieces of fire apparatus than the city of Troy. You should keep in mind that “city firefighting” is not the same as “country firefighting”. In rural areas, water must be moved from lakes and streams to the fire scene. Thus more trucks are needed. However, I, and many others in our town's fire service know that more efficient and less costly fire protection could be provided in our town if just one fire district was responsible for funding and managing that service. We also know that similar situations exist throughout the state.

Many of us in the volunteer fire service, know that consolidation and/or redefining of fire districts could provide more efficient, and less costly fire protection in many areas of rural and suburban New York. Elsewhere in the state, different problems exist, and different solutions may be needed. For example, the mega-suburbs of Nassau and Suffolk counties may have grown to a point where they may benefit from establishment of county-wide paid fire service, as was done recently in Florida.

One solution that I want to caution you against, is doing away with the fire-district system, and putting your fire protection needs in the hands of local town governments. One need only to look at the many problems that some villages have in funding and managing their village volunteer fire departments to understand what I mean.

One reason why fire districts have worked so well these past 75 years is because at least 90% of the district commissioners have been volunteer firefighters themselves. They are a special breed. They are men and women born with a desire to help and safeguard their fellows. They are, most importantly, non-political. There is no politics played at board meetings, there are no favors granted, and none expected. The only questions considered are “how can we provide the very best fire protection to our community, and safety for our firefighters, at the least feasible cost.”

The State Legislature had, some 75 years ago, in their wisdom, created a near perfect local government system –one that is non-paid, non-political, and truly dedicated to serving the local community. Seventy-five years later, that system now needs your help to bring it up to date. More than 100,000 New York State volunteer firefighters, and the many millions of citizens that they protect 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, are looking forward to the results of your work.

This concludes my comments today. I thank you again for this opportunity to state publicly what I have known for some time. I hope you will ask me to elaborate further on my comments. I will now try to answer any questions you may have.