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Fire districts are costly

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Guest essayist

The Dec. 8 election for fire district commissioners is a date to remember for taxpayers who want reduced local property taxes.

By state law, fire districts are separate and independent units of local government, typically governed by five to seven commissioners who are elected by voters within each fire district. Terms are staggered so that changing a board requires several elections.

From the perspective of taxpayers, the key point is this — fire commissioners develop and approve the budget for their district and determine the property taxes needed to support their budget. Thus, if taxpayers want to reduce their fire district property tax, taxpayers need to convince their fire commissioners to reduce the district budget, or elect different commissioners at the next election.

In 2006, state law was changed to improve the auditing and budgeting of fire districts. As a result, expenditure information for each district is now available on the Office of State Comptroller Web site. For 23 reporting fire districts in Monroe County, total expenditures rose from \$44.8 million in 2006 to \$53 million in 2008, an increase of 18.3 percent, which was more than double the northeast regional Consumer Price Index of 7.2 percent for the same period.

Can anything be done to slow down this relentless growth in costs without compromising the quality of our fire services? Studies done by the Center for Governmental Research and other organizations across the country have demonstrated that having too many individual governments (there are 867 fire districts in New York) leads to fragmented decision making, which leads to unnecessary and inefficient duplication of resources.

For example, one study comparing northern Virginia (where fire services are managed at a county level) with Long Island (where fire services are fragmented) found four times more equipment on Long Island, even though response times and insurance ratings were comparable. With fire trucks now ranging in cost from \$250,000 to over \$750,000, unnecessary duplication quickly adds significant increases to property taxes.

Individual citizens do have the power to change the system. Citizens can affect the election of fire district commissioners. They can initiate dissolution and consolidation of fire districts through a citizen petition. There are ways to reduce the costs of fire services in communities, but citizens need to become directly involved in the process.

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