



Options for Schodack Fire Departments

Initial Concepts for the Future of the Fire Service

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Town of Schodack and State LGE

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Options for the Future

The fire service in Schodack has been undergoing incremental changes for generations as new apparatus are purchased, stations are renovated and tactics revised. The current system is meeting the basic fire protection and emergency response needs in the community. However, the character of the community is slowly changing and the demands on the fire service are shifting, bringing the need for change to the forefront. The key findings indicate that there might be a need to change the current fire service delivery model in the near future to ensure effective response, to limit the administrative burden on existing leadership and to help fund costs for the future. This section explores several potential models going forward, including maintaining the status quo, expanding shared services, and shifting to one district – with a single company or multiple companies, and different levels of career staffing. All of the changes involving districts and career staffing will require substantial planning and engagement from a variety of stakeholders, including the firefighters, current commissioners, the town board and relevant village boards.

It should also be noted that none of the options considers reducing the number of stations in the town. Because of the road network in the community, it is difficult to advocate for closing any stations because it might adversely impact response times under the current operational model of volunteer firefighters responding to the station first and then to a scene. However, if a new station is proposed by any district or partnership of districts, location should be considered related to the whole town fire response.

Option 1: Status Quo

This option involves keeping the six fire departments serving their communities in the same manner that they are in 2018. The departments already cooperate at a relatively high level with frequent meetings at the chief level, joint dispatching of neighboring departments on fire calls, purchasing of compatible equipment and training exercises. The departments and districts are each managing their own affairs in terms of governance, planning, budgeting and operations.

The largest concern with keeping the status quo is the nearly universal sense that it is difficult to muster an effective firefighting force during normal business hours. This is because the population increasingly commutes out of the town or works for employers that are less likely to support leaving work during the day. The next most significant concern is the burden of managing the departments and the district. New requirements seem to be added regularly and there are relatively few young members who are getting engaged in the leadership of the organizations. The current financial model allows the departments to meet their existing needs and address future

concerns, but it might not be sufficient should operating costs increase. The tax rates in the fire districts have been grown modestly (0 to 3 percent) over the last four years. There are potential costs facing each of the districts in the next handful of years that might accelerate cost increases.

The status quo can certainly continue into the future, but the pressure to change to properly address the expectations of the community might further stress the volunteers in both operational and administrative roles. The increasing age of the volunteers is also a significant concern as many of the departments lack a strong base of younger volunteers. On the financial side, there might also be a need to accelerate the rate at which the tax rates are increased if the operating costs continue to grow and the taxable assessed value does not increase.

Option 2: Expanding Sharing of Services

The six fire departments in this study already share services with each other on both a formal and informal level, including:

- Regular leadership meetings between departments;
- Automatic aid for significant events and at different times of day;
- Coordination of purchasing to support interoperability and reduce costs;
- Joint recruiting efforts; and
- Fit testing and physicals.

Many logical opportunities for sharing have already been acted upon by the existing departments. Other potential opportunities are described below including Administrative Support, Common SOGs/Policies, Training and Safety Officer, and Information Technology Sharing.

2A: Administrative Support

Several chiefs reported that paperwork was increasingly burdensome and a deterrent for future leaders. However, given the size of the different operations, it is difficult to justify a paid position. One potential solution is a paid administrator with responsibilities between several or all of the departments. This person could be responsible for a variety of tasks, including record keeping, scheduling of maintenance, and facilitating purchasing. Under this model, the districts using these services would share the costs and supervision of the position.

A full-time position shared between four of the departments is estimated to have a salary of \$60,000 plus benefits equal to 50% of wages, for a total cost of \$90,000. If the

position was shared equally between four departments, the cost would be \$22,500 each. This would represent around a 15 to 20% increase in the budgets for each of the four departments. While this would have a substantial impact, it could bring much-needed relief at a lower cost than any department pursuing this option alone.

2B: Training and Safety Officer

A town-wide training officer would focus on helping each department complete the necessary training and keep records for personnel and key safety equipment. This option envisions a compensated position either in coordination with the administrative support identified above or as a standalone support to the departments. This person would support the existing town-wide training efforts by providing administrative support, developing curricula and providing some of the training. This position would work with and through the chiefs in each of the departments to ensure that the necessary training objectives are completed.

A full-time position shared between four of the departments is estimated to have a salary of \$55,000 plus benefits equal to 50% of wages, for a total cost of \$82,500. If the position was shared equally between four departments, the cost would be \$20,600 each. This would represent around an 8 to 18% increase in the budgets for each of the four departments. While this would have a substantial impact, it could bring much-needed relief at a lower cost than any department pursuing this option alone.

2C: Common SOGs/Policies

Each operation has a set of standard operating guidelines and policies. Some of these come from another generation with little review, and others have been recently created with the help of outside organizations. There is substantial overlap between the documents that were reviewed in this process. Some departments acknowledge there is a challenge reviewing and modernizing the documents.

A common set of SOGs/Policies that were adhered to by each department would accomplish parallel goals of reducing administrative burdens and fostering a common operational atmosphere. There would be room for department customization to account for apparatus and operating territory, but those variations could be kept to a minimum. The initial process of adopting a common set of SOGs/Policies could be arduous, but would result in removing a burden for each department. As part of this process, a regular review and revision framework should be established to ensure that the documents are kept up to date.

2D: Information Technology

The departments have a variety of different software programs used for administering their operations. The most common program related to responding is lamResponding

and the most common records management program is Red Alert. For either of the programs, it could be possible to reduce costs by purchasing the software license through a single entity, such as the town, and allowing each department to operate off the single license. While there might be some cost savings, another factor to consider is the increased operational information sharing. For example, with lamResponding, if multiple departments were using the software, they would be able monitor each other's responding manpower for cross-district assignments and to improve communication on events such as training or community conditions.

Option 3: Creating One District from Several

In New York, fire districts are separate municipalities governed by their own elected board of commissioners. Fire protection districts are town tax districts administered by a town board that are used to contract for fire service. There are also village fire departments that serve the village and can contract to provide service in the surrounding areas. Article 17-A of General Municipal Law governs the reorganization of municipalities, including fire districts. The information provided is a high-level summary and more detailed planning would be necessary before creating a single district.

In Schodack, there are four fire districts and a village fire department participating in this study. There is no legal barrier to any or all of the contiguous districts joining into one district. The process can begin either with a board initiation process (similar to what is already underway) or with a citizen petition requesting a consolidation or dissolution of certain districts. This report will focus on the board-initiated process of consolidation of several departments into a single district. The discussion first focuses on the creation of the district and then how it would impact operations.

Step 1: Creation of a Joint Consolidation Agreement

Each local government entity (town board, village board and relevant fire commissions) would work together to develop a joint consolidation agreement that outlines a number of items, such as the names of each entity and the new name, territorial boundaries, estimated fiscal cost and type of consolidated entity. The agreement would specify what assets and debts of the districts would transfer to the new district. The entity would be either a fire protection district, fire district or joint fire district (if the villages of Castleton and Nassau were included). This agreement would specify how the district would be governed (such as number of commissioners) and when the transition would occur.

Given the tradition of fire districts in the town, it seems unlikely that consolidation would lead to a fire protection district. Also, given the participation of both the Nassau Joint Fire District (which already includes the village of Nassau) and the Village of

Castleton, it is likely that at least one of those governments would participate in a further merger. Therefore, the more likely scenario is one with a joint fire district involving some or all of the study departments, including one that provides service to a village. A Joint Fire District allows for the option of appointed commissioners that would give representation from the village(s) and town(s) based on the agreement.

The joint consolidation agreement needs to be supported by a majority of the members of each of the involved boards. Once passed by the boards, it moves to the mandated public engagement. However, a good practice would be for the involved boards to hold hearings on draft plan before voting to adopt it.

Step 2: Public Engagement

After the joint consolidation agreement is passed by the governing bodies, they must publish the agreement and a descriptive summary in public places and on their websites. A summary must also be published for four successive weeks in a newspaper. One or more hearings must be held on the agreement between 35 and 90 days of adopting it. The agreement could be modified as long as it met the requirements set forth in statute. A final version of the agreement would need to be approved within 180 days of the final hearing and then be publicized again.

There is no requirement for a public referendum to create a consolidated joint fire district.

Step 3: Potential Implementation Timeline

Aside from the required public meeting guidelines under Article 17-A, there is little guidance established for the time for the work toward consolidation to be undertaken. In previous efforts in New York, there has been at least a year between the decision to consolidate and the action taking effect. This year allows for the department leadership and municipal officials to work through the myriad of issues ranging from the selection of officers to the adoption of policies to the response protocols and hundreds of decisions in between.

Potential Fiscal Impacts of Consolidation

For purposes of this model, all the districts in the study and village of Castleton would participate in the consolidation. The estimations are intended to give context, but should not be considered a precise forecast. The taxable assessed values for the municipalities under consideration is \$1.13 billion. The total combined fire levies is

\$1.01 million¹. This would yield a tax rate of about \$0.89 per thousand. The median home value used for the projections are \$215,000.

Current Tax Environment

	Assessed Value	Tax Rate (per thousand)	Current Levy
EAST SCHODACK FIRE	\$140,027,811	\$0.72	\$100,821
SCHODACK F.P. DIST	\$72,777,295	\$0.71	\$51,784
NASSAU LAKE WEST FPD	\$146,622,727	\$0.97	\$142,284
SCHODACK VALLEY	\$280,065,252	\$0.68	\$191,404
SOUTH SCHODACK	\$198,991,789	\$0.87	\$173,170
SCHODACK LANDING	\$55,786,621	\$1.80	\$100,500
NASSAU FIRE DIST (Schodack)	\$5,632,780	\$0.77	\$4,312
NASSAU FPD (Nassau)	\$46,656,479	\$1.78	\$83,000
NASSAU FIRE DISTRICT (Nassau)	\$102,457,118	\$0.99	\$101,839
CASTLETON (estimated village share)	\$83,588,197	\$0.67	\$56,200
Potential Town wide JFD District –level distribution	\$1,132,606,069	\$0.89	\$1,005,314

Impact to Tax Rates of Current Levy Structure

Under this projection, six taxing districts would see an increase in their taxes of between 2 and 22 cents, leading to an estimated impact for a median home of between \$4 and \$47 per year. The remaining five taxing districts would see a decrease of between 8 cents and 91 cents, for a savings of between \$196 and \$17 per year.

Impact to Tax Rates of Current Levy Structure Table

	Increase (Decrease) Rate	Annual Cost Change for Median Home (\$215,000)
EAST SCHODACK FIRE	\$0.17	\$37
SCHODACK F.P. DIST	\$0.18	\$38
NASSAU LAKE WEST FPD	\$(0.08)	\$(17)

¹ For the village of Castleton, the fire expenditures of 2018-19 were used (\$106,200) minus the revenue from the fire protection district (\$50,000) to estimate the share of the village tax for fire protection.

Impact to Tax Rates of Current Levy Structure Table

	Increase (Decrease) Rate	Annual Cost Change for Median Home (\$215,000)
EAST SCHODACK FIRE	\$0.17	\$37
SCHODACK VALLEY	\$0.21	\$44
SOUTH SCHODACK	\$0.02	\$4
SCHODACK LANDING	\$(0.91)	\$(196)
NASSAU FIRE DIST (Schodack)	\$0.12	\$27
NASSAU FPD (Nassau)	\$(0.89)	\$(191)
NASSAU FIRE DISTRICT (Nassau)	\$(0.10)	\$(22)
CASTLETON (estimated village share)	\$0.22	\$47

Impact to Tax Structure with Increased Costs for Fire Service

As noted elsewhere under Option 2, there is the potential for increased costs in the near future for the fire service. If the cost increased 15% under the new model, the levy would be about \$1.21 million on the same \$1.13 billion assessed value. This would result in tax rate of about \$1.07 per thousand. This scenario would lead to an increased tax rate for all but two of the taxing districts, but for the median home, the highest increased tax bill would be \$85 per year.

Impact to Tax Structure with Increased Costs for Fire Service Table

	Increase (Decrease) Rate	Annual Change 15% Increase
EAST SCHODACK FIRE	\$0.35	\$75
SCHODACK F.P. DIST	\$0.36	\$77
NASSAU LAKE WEST FPD	\$0.10	\$21
SCHODACK VALLEY	\$0.39	\$83
SOUTH SCHODACK	\$0.20	\$43
SCHODACK LANDING	\$(0.73)	\$(157)
NASSAU FIRE DIST (Schodack)	\$0.30	\$65
NASSAU FPD (Nassau)	\$(0.71)	\$(152)
NASSAU FIRE DISTRICT (Nassau)	\$0.08	\$16
CASTLETON (estimated village share)	\$0.40	\$85

Benefits and Drawbacks of Consolidated District

The current governance structure of the fire service developed over the last several generations; however, there has been significant interest in exploring a change to a consolidated governance structure (joint fire district). The benefits of a single structure include:

- Single leadership board planning financial and operational aspects of the fire service
- One common tax rate for all in the district
- Larger assessed valuation and levy allows for needed expenses to be spread across the whole community
- Reflects the reality that the fire service already plans and operates together
- Reduces the demand for volunteer leadership
- Minimal financial impact of a consolidation
- Currently, the fire districts carry little debt

However, there are potential drawbacks:

- Reduced representation from the community as five fire commissions and a village board would consolidate their decision-making authority into one board.
- There would be a shift, albeit relatively small, in the tax burden with the consolidation.
- The transition could lead to one-time costs associated with developing a new joint fire district.
- Areas of the town might lose their elected representation to a fire district.

Post Consolidation Operations:

There are two primary models for the fire service to operate after a consolidation, either as several separate companies or as a single company. They are discussed briefly below and will be an important topic of the consolidation plan.

Continuing Operations as Separate Companies

Under state law, a fire district is allowed to contract with multiple fire companies within that district. In Schodack, under a consolidation agreement, this arrangement would keep the existing companies operating under a consolidated district instead of the separate districts that exist today. Keeping this current operation structure not only has the benefit of keeping existing identities intact, it also removes the complication of

needing to address the combining of the several fire companies. The companies would work with the district to establish appropriate responsibilities and a new response regimen.

There would be benefit to the operations of the new district to create a district chief and assistant or deputy chiefs. These would be selected from amongst qualified individuals in the companies. One method would be for candidates for district chief and assistants to be nominated by companies and then voted on by all the eligible members of each company. Another would be for a rotation of the chief roles between the companies on an annual basis so that each company would have a firefighter as chief every six years. This could be ordered in such a manner that a person would serve as assistant chief for two years before becoming chief for a year to promote continuity of leadership. Each company would be led by their own elected officers for both operational and civil matters.

Under this model, apparatus and stations that are owned by the company would remain in their purview. District assets operated by the company, such as fire apparatus, would be identified as part of the new consolidated fire district, but could still be identified as part of the individual companies. There would still be opportunities for individual company fundraising and community activities as deemed necessary by the companies. Companies would also be able to keep their current names and traditions.

In the Rochester area, the Henrietta Fire District operates with several volunteer fire companies as well as a number of firefighters paid by the district. In the village of Spring Valley, three fire companies operate serving the one village.

Becoming a Single Fire Company

Creating a single fire company to serve the consolidated fire district would be a bold step to transitioning to a new operating model. While it adds a layer of complication by also consolidating the separate fire companies (or dissolving them and creating a new one), the result would be a complete transition to the new operating model. There would be a unified chain of command in the town. The selection of company officers would be among all eligible members. The collective burden of administrating fire companies would be reduced as only a single set of civil officers would need to be elected. There would be substantial work needed for transition to the single company and corporate changes might lag behind any operational changes. The need for outside fundraising would get shared across all the firefighters in the community.

The intangible benefits might include an increased esprit de corps as community members, especially younger ones, might gain interest in joining a new organization and work to shape its culture.

Smaller Variations of Consolidation

A Joint Consolidated District does not need to include all the fire districts in the town. It could be undertaken by any two or more contiguous districts. Depending on the districts seeking to consolidate, the process could be simplified by just extending a fire district into a fire protection district or dissolving one, while expanding another.

Option 4: Career Staffing

None of the fire departments expressly stated that they are considering a paid fire department. However, all stated that they were having trouble getting an adequate response to calls during the day. Given this reality, it is likely that the districts in the town will need to consider adding career staffing at some point in the near future.

To benchmark costs for a firefighter in the greater Capital Region, CGR identified five departments with career staff. We found their entry salary and highest end salary to establish a range. We then calculated the median of the range. For our modeling, we will use a median firefighter salary of \$50,000 a year, or an hourly wage of \$24.00. We will use a fringe rate for 70% on top of the salary for full-time employees.

4A: Daytime Only

Under this model, five fighters would be hired full time to work forty hours per week. They would each work four ten hour days in a week and each day there would be four firefighters on duty. A sample schedule is shown below. Having four firefighters on duty would allow the arriving crew, at a minimum, to effect an initial search and suppression using a two in, two out rule. A possible operating model would be to have two firefighters stationed on engines in different sectors of the district.

**Potential Staffing Schedule for Day Time Coverage,
Weekdays (Hours worked per day)**

Firefighter	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Total
A	10		10	10	10	40
B	10	10		10	10	40
C	10	10	10		10	40
D	10	10	10	10		40
E		10	10	10	10	40
Total	40	40	40	40	40	

The estimated cost for this model would be \$425,000 per year in base salary. An estimated \$60,000 would be needed in overtime and hourly employees to backfill for vacations. This would result in an estimated \$485,000 in costs per year for personnel. This would result in an approximate 43 cents per \$1,000 increase on the taxes of a

consolidated fire district and would cost a median homeowner about \$92.00 per year in additional taxes. The current tax bill is about \$190 per year for a median homeowner.

4B: Full-Time Operations

To provide for 24/7 operations, we model having four firefighters, including a lieutenant, on duty at all times. This would necessitate hiring a minimum of 12 full-time firefighters, 4 full-time lieutenants and developing a cadre of part-time firefighters to backfill as needed.

Firefighter Salaries	\$1,020,000
Lieutenant Salaries	\$412,000
Overtime/ Backfill	\$358,000
Total	\$1,790,000

This model would bring an increase of \$1.60 per \$1,000 in fire taxes to a consolidated district, leading to an increased tax bill of about \$340 per year for a median homeowner. As noted above, this is up from \$190 per year. The new total would be \$530 per year.

Option Comparison Table

The table below provides a broad comparison of the different options discussed and their relative tax impacts on a median value home. All of the options would need further clarification as they were developed that would influence the fiscal and operational impacts.

Option	Description	Fiscal Impact for Median Home
1 – Status Quo	Multiple fire districts and a village each operating their own departments independently but coordinating on some planning and large events. All volunteer staff	\$150 to 380, avg. \$214
2A – Administrative Support	Several fire districts/departments hire a full time administrator at estimated \$90,000 salary and benefits to assist in	10 to 15% increase in district expenses for

Option	Description	Fiscal Impact for Median Home
	recordkeeping, planning, purchasing and similar support tasks.	participating districts
2B Training Officer	Several fire districts/departments hire a full time training coordinator at estimated \$82,500 salary and benefits to assist in performing, planning and recordkeeping for training.	8 to 18% increase in district expenses for participating districts
3 – Consolidated Fire District	Single joint fire district operating in study area with similar operations as today	\$190
3 – Consolidated Fire District with 15% increased costs	Single joint fire district operating	\$230
4A – Day Time Fire Staffing	4 FF on duty 50 hours per week with full weekday coverage. Estimated annual cost of \$485,000	\$280
4B – Full Time Fire Staffing	4 FF on duty 24/7 with coverage in whole district. Estimated annual cost of \$1.8 million.	\$530

Moving Toward Options

For nearly all of the options above, there will need to additional discussion by elected officials and members of the various departments before adoption. There is the potential for grant funding to support the planning and implementation of some of the options from either the state or federal level. Particular areas of opportunity include an Implementation Grant through Citizen's Reorganization Empowerment Grant, the County Wide Shared Services Initiative programs and the Municipal Restructuring Fund at the state level and SAFER grants at the federal level.