

## **Minutes of Public Hearing for the Proposed 2008 Budget October 16, 2007**

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**PRESENT:** Commissioners Barlyn, Constantine, Murray, Nappi, and Chairman Woehrle  
Attorney Hayner, Treasurer Hudy, and Secretary Ostrander.  
Also present: Chief Lingenfelter and approximately ten guests.

The Budget Hearing was called to order at 7:00 p.m. under the direction of Chairman Woehrle.

Chairman Woehrle read a notice stating the purpose of the hearing in accordance with Town Law 105 (3). He also pointed out that copies of the meeting agenda and copies of the Proposed 2008 Budget were available to the guests.

Secretary Ostrander read a notice stating that the required notifications were given.

Treasurer Hudy gave a brief summary of the proposed budget to the Board of Fire Commissioners and the members of the public who were present. The proposed 2008 Budget is a 6.8% increase over the 2007 Budget.

The Chairman opened the floor to public comments. The public was asked state their name and address for the record and to limit their comments to five minutes. They were asked to direct all questions to the Board or to the Treasurer, but were told that this was not a question and answer session. All questions would be answered at the conclusion of the public comments period.

### **PUBLIC COMMENTS:**

Mr. Robert Coan, 1394 Ruffner Road – Stated that there is \$138,000 going into a reserve account. He asked if this was an existing account with a balance. He also asked if the reserve account was used last year to purchase the house next door, or hire a consultant. Mr. Coan also stated the expenditures from 2003 to 2008 have increased 100% in the five year period and asked how this could be. Also, the public does not understand medical benefits that the district employees receive. There are co-pays to prescriptions that the Fire District is reimbursing for and the firemen pay less than 5% of total medical insurance bills, the public should be made aware of this. Mr. Coan then asked how many SUV's are provided to employees and how they are accounted for. He also stated that he was not clear about Service Awards and who it covered. The budget line for education was also not clear if it was

an employee benefit. Mr. Coan also asked how many employees are on disability since there are 16 firemen on the payroll.

Mr. Peter Kent, 2151 Lynnwood Drive – Stated that Niskayuna Fire District No. 1 was costing 68% more per year than the Town taxes which pay for several services. He asked why it cost more to run the Fire District than the Town. He also stated that when a Fire Commissioner moves from firemen to board member, he must answer to tax payers and not to the fire department. He was upset about the proposed 6 million dollar building last year and said that issues must be resolved in favor of the taxpayers. He asked why we were not hearing anything more about a new firehouse. He also stated that at Union College, employees must contribute a large portion of cost for their medical insurance. Finally, he stated that Fire District No. 2 uses a different approach to ambulance and EMS that would cut Fire District No.1 costs in half if the same system was used.

Mr. Frigolette, 2361 St. Joseph Drive – He stated that he is concerned that the Town tax relative to the Fire District tax base is different. He asked why the health insurance cost was so high, and stated that the County has contracted for meds and lowered the prescription costs. He also wants to know why the number of employees has increased.

Mr. Richard C. Fritz, 2476 Hilltop Road – Mr. Fritz congratulated the Board on the job it has done. He stated that their efforts benefit the Fire District. He then stated that the Emergency Medical Service program was much different now than it was when it started. Billing for this service has not happened and a town-wide ambulance may be the answer. He asked what part of the budget increase EMS plays overall. He also asked how the fire tax compares to surrounding districts. He stated that personnel matters appear to be based on medical service and not the fire service. He then asked what was done to reduce the original draft of the budget to what it is now. He stated that the reserve account is for equipment and that if there was not enough put into that account each year, it would be difficult to keep up with replacement equipment. Finally, he stated that the tax is heavy and if it cannot be lowered, it must be publicized so it is understood.

Mr. Alex White, 1369 Rosehill Blvd. – Mr. White stated that from 2002 to 2006, the Fire District tax has gone up 38.92% which is excessive. He stated that it is not looking any better. If most of the Town was included, the tax would just be a little higher than just the Fire District.

Additional Comments from Mr. Coan:

- Salaries and health insurance premiums are big items. We don't know the comparisons from last year's budget to this year's.
- It is hard to find things due to the format of the budget.
- He cannot find who has SUV's and what they are used for.
- He would like someone to explain the reserve accounts tonight.

Additional Comments from Mr. Kent:

- Retirement expenses look high. At some point there should be negotiation with the union to lower this expense.

- Disability of paid firemen – there appears to be six people on disability – why? Should something be done better?

**Questions/Comments from The Board:**

Commissioner Barlyn stated that we have cut the present budget to mandated levels. He then stated that there may have been errors in previous contracts. He personally contacted forty other Fire Districts in the capital region and we have the highest budget. We have made efforts to change. If we could convince the other fire districts to town-wide EMS, we would.

Commissioner Constantine noted that he had a question on one of the line items for potential retirement and asked that it be looked at by Treasurer Hudy.

**Response to Public Questions:**

Commissioner Murray along with other Board members, answered most of the questions asked by the public.

- Reserve Accounts – There are several reserve accounts for apparatus, building, communication equipment, etc. The \$138,000 is slated to be divided into three of these accounts.
- The house was purchase from a reserve account.
- Commissioner Murray stated that the medical benefits are contractual and since the firefighters place themselves at high risk every day, they deserve to have good medical benefits.
- Chairman Woehrle explained that the Career Chief, The Volunteer Chief and the Volunteer 1<sup>st</sup> Assistant Chief use District vehicles. The Chiefs respond in the district vehicles from home and from work to emergency calls. There is a policy in place that describes the use of these vehicles.
- Service Awards is the NY State defined contribution retirement program for volunteers.
- The education portion of the budget is for payroll expenditures to cover for New York State mandated in-service classes, continuing education, drills, lecturers, and instructor conferences for career firefighters.
- There is currently one firefighter on disability.
- The new firehouse project is currently on hold.
- Commissioner Murray spoke on the EMS issues and stated that we had a public meeting to discuss the possibility of contracting with outside ambulance service for transportation of patients and had a large response from the public that they did not want to change. We have been trying for years to change the law that prohibits us to bill for ambulance service. We are still looking at this as a possible solution.
- When comparing fire tax for our district to surrounding districts, you must remember that we have a unique district that not only is combination of career and volunteer, but also provides a higher level of service to the community than other districts.
- Commissioner Murray stated that although our costs are high, we also have an exceptionally large call volume and that the cost per call is actually lower than other districts.
- Volunteer Chief Ostrander stated that there is a decline in the number of volunteers in our fire district due to the huge commitment of time not only for the volume of calls but also for the required minimum training. In addition to the State requirements of initial firefighter training which are close to 80 hours of training, volunteer members are required to attend weekly drills and various additional training courses and continuing

education courses. There are not many people in our community willing to make those time commitments.

- Commissioner Murray stated that he attended a seminar on sharing of services. He stated that there are grants available for studies, but that other districts would have to agree to the study also.

Motion/ Nappi, 2<sup>nd</sup>/ Constantine: To hold a Special Meeting to discuss the 2008 budget on Thursday November 1, 2007 at 7 pm at the Balltown road Station. Passed 5-0.

Motion/ Murray, 2<sup>nd</sup>/ Nappi: To adjourn at 8:37 pm. - Passed 5-0

- **A Special Meeting to discuss the Budget is scheduled for Thursday, November 1, 2007, at 7:00 p.m. at the Balltown Rd. Station**

Respectfully submitted,

John E. Ostrander III  
Secretary