

Briarcliff Manor Fire Department

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January 3rd, 2024

Briarcliff Manor Board of Education
45 Ingham Road
Briarcliff Manor, NY 10510

Subject: Urgent Appeal for Granting of Property Tax Exemption for Volunteer Firefighters and EMS Providers

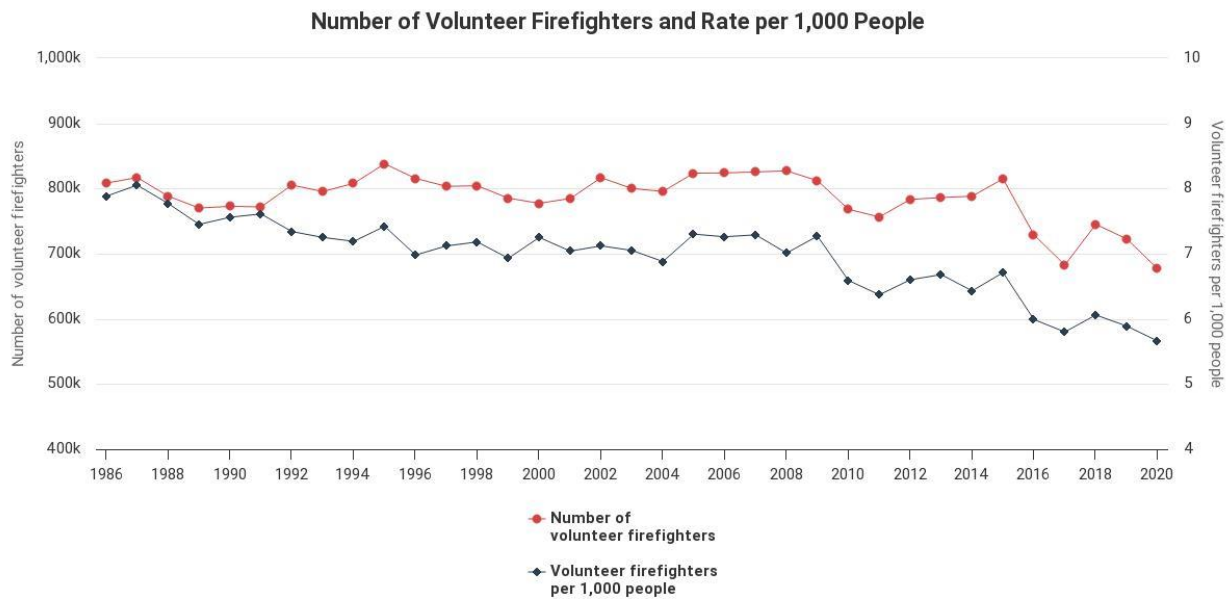
Dear Board Members,

I trust this letter finds you well. I appreciate the opportunity to address the board during the recent work session. I am writing to follow up on behalf of the dedicated members of the Briarcliff Manor Fire Department and EMS regarding the critical issue of the property tax exemption for volunteer firefighters and EMS providers within our tax district. Unfortunately, our members left the school board meeting concerned by the strong and negative message of under appreciation and disrespect conveyed by the board. The unique challenges and commitments faced by emergency responders, including rigorous training (the bare minimum requirements to be certified to be an interior firefighter or EMT are ~ 130 hours initially, plus 40 hours annually for refresher training and CMEs) and certification requirements and working in hazardous conditions, set them apart from other volunteers. Statements comparing our members to other types of volunteers display a lack of awareness of the work we do, and the time commitment required.

At the meeting, the question was asked "What are other school districts doing?" The forward-thinking Districts of Chappaqua and Valhalla School Districts have recognized the long-term financial benefits to supporting the Volunteer Emergency Services in their communities. They have already passed this exemption with positive outcomes to membership in both the fire departments and EMS agencies.

Backdrop:

I wish to highlight the nationwide trend of declining volunteerism, which poses a significant risk to communities relying on volunteer emergency services. The chart below illustrates the trend over approximately 35 years in both a gross number of volunteers as well as number of volunteers per capita. The decline is obvious, especially in the face of population growth. One thing that is not obvious from this chart is that the number of calls has increased while the availability of each emergency responder has decreased.



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The proactive nature of the property tax exemption is crucial in addressing this decline, ensuring the continued availability of well-trained volunteers. Albany has recognized the risk to the critical services provided by volunteer responders and took action. Now, local action is imperative to address this risk. Volunteers invest considerable time and effort in training and qualifying to provide high-quality emergency services. Their dedication and professionalism, requires hundreds of hours of Federal OSHA, NYS and National Fire Safety Association training, (in 2023 alone, BMFD and EMS logged over 2,000 hours of training above and beyond the drills, meetings, and emergency calls). This reflects their commitment to risking their lives and the financial wellbeing of their families for the safety of our community.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, while schools and businesses went 100% remote or shut down entirely, volunteer members of the BMFD continued to perform their duties. They risked bringing Covid home to their families while dealing with nation-wide shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE). Covid is still a risk. The chart below shows how our call volume continues to grow.

Briarcliff Manor Fire Department and EMS Emergency Call Trend					
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Fire	477	487	488	559	548
EMS	664	801	1041	1175	1128

In addition to the call numbers presented above, our members commit themselves to covering dedicated shifts. This year, we recorded 3,849 signups for EMS shifts and 2,518 for Fire shifts. This

¹ Source: NFPA. US Fire Department Profile 2020 Rita Fahy, Ben Evarts and Gary P. Stein, September 2022. <https://www.nfpa.org/-/media/Files/News-and-Research/Fire-statistics-and-reports/Emergency-responders/osfdprofile.pdf>

represents how members commit their time to be available in your time of need whether an emergency call comes in or not.

Financial Concerns:

We heard your concerns about Albany passing another unfunded mandate and putting you in a tough position. The concerns you raised about unduly burdening the non-volunteers are understandable. We heard your concern about our department serving other communities not in the school district. We do that to abide by the Mutual Aid arrangements between the emergency services. If we don't help them, they are not obliged to help us when we need it. There have been numerous times when we have needed fire and ambulance help due to our lack of volunteers, equipment or multiple emergencies. However, our view is that the positive impact on recruitment and retention this exemption will provide far outweighs any potential drawbacks associated with tax redistribution.

The estimated total exemption presented at your work session was approximately \$62,721 (\$44k in Mt. Pleasant and \$18.7k in Ossining) that would be reallocated to non-volunteer property owners and businesses. That would mean an estimated tax increase of \$31.94 in Mt. Pleasant and \$10.11 increase for Ossining properties.

Now consider the potential financial impact on your community's tax base if our volunteer numbers continue to decline and necessitate career augmentation. Conservative estimates of hiring and maintaining paid staff 24/7 for the fire department and the ambulance services exceed \$20 million annually. The additional costs will then be distributed to your school district taxpayers. You do the cost benefit analysis.

Additionally, veterans receive an exemption three times the value structured in much the same way as the proposal. As veterans pass or move away, the exemption could potentially be reallocated to the volunteers without any impact on your constituents.

Services Voluntarily Provided to School District:

Our volunteers make significant educational contributions by providing your students with public education that addresses curriculum requirements, all free of charge. These initiatives are invaluable in enhancing the safety and well-being of your students and the broader community. Our voluntary support for school athletics events not only reinforces a sense of community and safety during these activities but also saves the school district significant costs that would be incurred with a paid service. A contract agency costs as much as \$1,000 per Varsity and Jr. Varsity game.

Volunteers played a critical role in responding to emergency calls, both fire and EMS, at the three schools and the district offices. Their prompt and effective response ensures the safety of students, and district employees.

Community Values and Tradition:

The importance of community values and traditions upheld by the voluntary service of firefighters and EMS providers was born with the Village. In 1901 the village founder Walter W. Law saw the value of the volunteer services when he initiated and supported the formation of the Fire Department. This long-standing tradition of volunteerism in our community aligns seamlessly with the property tax exemption, and supporting our organization is synonymous with the community's commitment to essential services.

We encourage you to consider that students are required to perform community service for graduation, and supporting a volunteer organization providing essential services aligns perfectly with this goal.

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that we are educators ourselves. Many of our youth join us as Explorer Post or Junior Members and learn a wide variety of skills. Our department (and the EMS division in particular) is often a springboard responsible for launching young members into careers in medicine, para-medicine, and fire science, etc. We play a critical role in exposing young members to educational experiences that the school system doesn't and can't.

Volunteer Sacrifices:

Finally, we wish to emphasize the selfless dedication and sacrifices made by volunteer firefighters and EMS providers who serve the community with minimal financial compensation. The Village of Briarcliff Manor does provide Fire Department members with a Length of Service Awards Plan (LOSAP) program that sets aside only \$1,200/year into a retirement account for qualifying members. Members must qualify through active services throughout the year (minimum numbers of calls, meetings and drills, etc.), and are not vested until they achieve 5 active years within the first 10 years of Department membership. This money is unavailable until they reach the age of 65.

In conclusion, we urge the school board to adopt the property tax exemption for volunteer firefighters and EMS providers within your tax district. This exemption not only recognizes the vital services we provide but also ensures the sustainability of volunteer emergency services in the face of a national decline in volunteerism.

We wish to reaffirm that the property tax exemption is a time sensitive (deadline for the 2025 exemption is March 1, 2024) and this modest incentive for the recruitment and retention of volunteers is needed now!

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please contact me. I am more than willing to engage in further discussions to address any questions or concerns you may have.

Sincerely,



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