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EDITORIAL

A job well done

Though they are unlikely to get it from the defenders of the status quo, members of Greenburgh's Fire Department Consolidation and Government Efficiency Commission deserve kudos for their comprehensive report, released last week. The commission acknowledges the obstacles to a full legal consolidation of the Greenville, Hartsdale and Fairview fire districts and recommends achieving savings and improving efficiency through a partial consolidation.

The three districts in unincorporated Greenburgh are among the most expensive in the state to maintain. Their firefighters are paid 32 percent more and their chiefs 34 percent more than their peers in Scarsdale, White Plains and New Rochelle. The commission notes that the budget for compensation in the White Plains Fire Department is almost identical to the budget total of the three Greenburgh fire districts, but White Plains gets 56 more firefighters for the money.

The report is valuable not only for unincorporated Greenburgh and its three fire districts, but for the unblinking light it sheds on the fiscal and staffing problems confronting government on every level in the years ahead.

Public employee contracts have become increasingly divorced from the reality of a shrinking tax base. It is hard for union leaders to accept the fact that their members' salaries cannot continue to rise, that they will have to contribute to their health insurance premiums and that they will not be able to receive the six-figure pensions that some current retirees enjoy. But unrealistic promises made in more prosperous times simply cannot be kept.

Pensions must change from defined

benefit to defined contribution, and public employees must learn to take the same risks with their retirement funds that the private sector workers do.

One obstacle to change has been the spirit of competition that exists between different branches of public service. Fire district employees feel they should not have to make any sacrifices until the "bloated town budget" is trimmed, and until town employees are made to contribute to their health insurance premiums and pensions as well. No one wants to be the first to take a cut, but someone has to be, because union contracts expire at different times.

None of this is to say that firefighters aren't skilled, valued and vital to the safety and well being of our communities. In fact, the emotional attachment of the community to its firefighters is deep. But no matter how much we appreciate them, Greenburgh simply cannot continue to compensate its fire personnel at the existing rate, even if the economy rebounds.

Despite all the criticism directed at the fire consolidation commission and the lengthy delays that accrued as commission members argued among themselves, we find the report to be objective and thorough. Critics' opinions were duly noted and incorporated in the commission's findings; for example, the fact that Greenville does not have debt and would not want to have its taxes raised 21 percent, under legal consolidation, to help Hartsdale pay off its debt or to help Fairview incur debt to pay for needed improvements to its stations.

The report notes that Greenville makes use of the county's free dispatch system, while Hartsdale and Fairview use off-duty personnel as dispatch-

ers for an added cost of \$355,000-\$400,000 a year. But the commissioners dutifully report Hartsdale's reasons for preferring to use its own personnel.

Differences in practices regarding pension calculation, resources, holiday, sick day and overtime pay among the three districts are detailed. Charts make financial comparisons of expenses and revenues clear. For a technical document, the report is surprisingly readable and free of bureaucratic babble.

The commission was criticized for making suggestions that are not within the purview of the town to implement, like changing state laws regarding fire commissioner election dates and rules regarding the calculation of pensions. But these changes are unlikely to happen unless the local governments press state legislators to make them.

It is disturbing to read that the commission did not get full cooperation from the fire districts in providing information that any member of the public is entitled to by law. They were forced to go through the time-consuming and cumbersome process of making Freedom of Information Law requests; the Fairview District was particularly uncooperative. You have to be suspicious when taxpayer funded services refuse to tell you how they are spending public funds.

Finally, we agree with the report's recommendation to set up a "watchdog" to educate the public about fire district budgets and elections, foster transparency and encourage public involvement.

We hope the document will be discussed and its recommendations heeded while we still have some choices about how to contain costs and maintain the quality of these vital services.