

June 11, 2008

On June 10, the New York State Senate passed the "Emergency Services Volunteer Incentive Act". Among other things, this bill would increase income tax credits for volunteers with more than 4 years of service an additional \$400 (in addition to the current \$200). This was passed unanimously in the Senate.

Now this bill must be approved by the New York State Assembly.

Please contact your state assembly members and ask them to approve A5186-C, the Assembly bill:

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SENATE APPROVES LEGISLATION TO ENCOURAGE VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT

Albany, N.Y., June 10--The New York State Senate unanimously approved today legislation sponsored by State Senator George Winner (R-C-I, Elmira), chairman of the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources (LCRR), to help localities fend off potentially enormous future local property tax increases by offering incentives to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters and other emergency services personnel.

The legislation was approved by a vote of 60 to 0.

Winner noted that Senate action on his legislation, the "Emergency Services Volunteer Incentive Act," comes in the wake of last week's report from the state [Commission on Property Tax Relief](#). The commission's report, which among other recommendations calls for the state to implement a cap on school property tax increases, has made the issue of high property taxes No. 1 on the state's to-do list.

"High property taxes are the talk of the day throughout New York government. Volunteer recruitment and retention demands a place in the discussion. This issue warns of the next explosive property tax crisis facing localities across New York. We need to keep sounding the alarm," said Winner. "It would cost billions of dollars for local property taxpayers to pay for the critical services currently provided by volunteer firefighters and EMTs."

The [Firemen's Association of the State of New York \(FASNY\)](#) estimates that it would cost local taxpayers more than \$5 billion annually to replace volunteers with paid fire and ambulance services. According to FASNY, the number of volunteer firefighters statewide has declined from 140,000 in the early 1990s to fewer than 90,000 today. Volunteer emergency medical technicians (EMTs) experienced a decline from more than 50,000 to 35,000 during the same period, with some rural counties experiencing as much as a 50-percent depletion of their EMT ranks.

Winner has sponsored the "Emergency Services Volunteer Incentive Act" since 2005 and has been reaching out to Assembly leaders to encourage bipartisan support on the issue. The measure is sponsored by Assemblyman David Koon (D-Fairport), vice chair of the LCRR, and is currently in the Assembly Ways and Means Committee. It

must be approved by the Assembly and be signed by Governor David Paterson before becoming law.

While the importance of local first responders to community safety and security was widely recognized and praised in the aftermath of the September 11th tragedy, Winner said that it continues to be difficult, for a variety of reasons, for many local fire departments and ambulance companies to recruit and retain volunteers. He noted that some departments already employ paid, around-the-clock firefighters supported by volunteers.

In response, Winner's "Emergency Services Volunteer Incentive Act" would:

- *provide a \$400 state income tax credit for volunteer firefighters and ambulance workers who have been active for four or more consecutive years. This new tax incentive would be in addition to the \$200 income tax credit currently available to volunteers after one year of service;

- *exempt motor vehicles owned and used in the performance of duty by an emergency services volunteer from motor vehicle registration fees and vehicle use taxes;

- *authorize local volunteer fire and ambulance companies to use state-administered funds, collected annually through a two-percent fire insurance premium tax on out-of-state insurers, to help offset the cost of health insurance for their members;

- *increase the number of qualified candidates, from one to three, that volunteer companies can submit for participation in New York's "Volunteer Recruitment Service Scholarships" program, a college tuition assistance program for volunteers created by state lawmakers in 2002; and

- *direct the state Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC) to create a volunteer recruitment service college loan forgiveness program.

A December 2005 report by the [New York State Association of Towns](#) highlighted the volunteer crisis in the hopes of sparking interest within the state Legislature for a variety of potential solutions, including some of those included in Winner's legislation. In the report G. Jeffrey Haber, executive director of the Association of Towns, said that the "Association is deeply concerned that the continued decline in the number of volunteers in the fire and ambulance services throughout the state can only result in disaster for the residents of New York State. If the property tax system were forced to finance paid services in what are now volunteer systems, the impact would have grave consequences to the health and economic well-being of not just the towns, but the state as a whole."