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FASNY Budget Alert 2009

NYS Budget Brings Mixed Blessing for Volunteer Responders

The much heralded passage of the 2009 - 2010 budget brought a mix of good news and bad for the State's 130,000 emergency responders and contained language that addressed part of a solution for the Commercial Drivers License dilemma that surfaced late in 2008.

NYS Department of Motor Vehicles issued an opinion on a 2005 statute requiring CDL's for volunteer and career responders. The opinion was rendered on a poorly worded amendment to the NYS Vehicle and Traffic law that passed as part of the Transportation Bond Act of 2005. Although it was never the intention of the legislature, the confusing and vague language resulted in an opinion that allowed a responder to drive to a defined emergency without a CDL but required the CDL to get the equipment back to the Department.

The partial remedy contained in the budget allows transport to and from the emergency without requiring a CDL but does not deal with essential elements of usage such as training, parades and maintenance. This will be dealt with in separate bills that will address these critical elements. FASNY anticipates swift treatment of the issue by the Legislature, and will be urging members to contact the Governor to insure that NYS DMV and Federal DOT officials agree and sign off on the legislation.

Budget language that would have diluted the petition process, by which local government consolidation can occur, has been removed. FASNY opposed the inclusion of this language two years running and was successful in getting it removed as being ineffective as a cost cutting measure. While FASNY does not oppose such efficiencies, Fire Districts account for only 1% of local government expenditures while School Districts account for 66% of local expenditures. FASNY questioned why cost-cutting measures should be aimed at a local government entity driven completely by volunteers.

Budget levels for the Revolving Loan Program, which allows for low cost borrowing for equipment and other major expenditures by Fire Companies has remained at the same \$4.1million dollar level established over the past several years. While this funding is not adequate to make the fund truly self sustaining it will keep the program viable for the coming budgetary year depending on the number of loan applications received by the Revolving Loan Board. FASNY has consistently argued for a one- time infusion of \$10 million dollars permanent sustainability.

The Volunteer Firefighter and EMS Scholarship Fund has been discontinued. This fund was established almost a decade ago to attract young volunteers who were also continuing with their college education. The fund was administered by the NYS Higher Education Services Corporation and provided eligible volunteers, more than \$3000 annually to attend either public or private schools in New York State. Because of strict eligibility requirements, the program was

underutilized and deemed expendable. FASNY continues to review budget documents to determine available funding for existing program participants.