

What Every Long Islander Should Know About Firefighting Costs

By: Nancy Rauch Douzinas

Long Islanders owe an enormous debt to our volunteer firefighters. Not only are they brave, professional, and selfless. They also save us a great deal of money.

That's one of the things we discovered when we compared firefighting services on Long Island with those in the suburbs of Northern Virginia. It was part of a study that explored the huge differences between the regions in terms of taxes and costs of government.

A number of reasons have been offered for Long Island's high taxes. One of the most persuasive is our fragmented government structure. Two sets of data give you the idea:

Per capita government costs: Long Island—\$5,562. Northern Virginia—\$3,840.

Number of government entities: Long Island—439. Northern Virginia—17.

When we zoomed in on fire services, the pattern was similar, but with an important difference. Overall, these services are actually less costly on Long Island. That's not true of any other government function.

The reason is simple. Long Island's firefighters are mostly volunteers. Most of Northern Virginia's are salaried workers. As a result, their personnel costs are five times ours: \$125 per capita, to our \$23.

Take away that advantage, however, and the picture changes. Excluding personnel, per capita costs are twice as high on Long Island. Costs per square mile are almost 3.5 times greater.

Why? The data show a familiar pattern. Long Island has 179 fire departments, to Northern Virginia's 4. So, while our region has 1.3 times the area and 2.2 times the population, we have 6.6 times more fire stations, 7.7 times more engines, and 8.2 more ladder trucks.

The result: almost double the equipment and capital costs; almost triple the operating costs.

Long Islanders do appreciate their firefighters, and there is little clamor for change. But these findings remind us again of the price we are all paying across the board for our unwieldy patchwork of governments.

The study suggests that government services can be streamlined without loss of quality. In fact, both Fairfax and Loudoun, the counties that comprise the Northern Virginia region, have successfully transitioned from a patchwork of volunteer companies like ours to a centralized system.

Fairfax's transition took place over decades. Loudoun's continues to evolve under a carefully developed plan begun in the late 1990s. Both today have smoothly running networks, including some independent volunteer stations and a combination of career and volunteer firefighters. The counties provide most of the funding, as well as coordination, communications, investigation, code inspection, etc.

How are they doing? An examination of the insurance industry's ISO ratings for fire response times, number of fire calls, and number of EMS calls, show no major difference in quality between those counties and Long Island.

The ultimate lesson may apply to more than just fire services. People look at Long Island's mind-boggling web of governments and say, "That's the way it is, and you're never going to change it." The reality is: regions *are* changing it. It can be done.

Nancy Rauch Douzinas is president of the Rauch Foundation, and convener of the Long Island Index. The Index provides data about the Long Island region, in order to promote informed public debate and sound policy making. For more information visit www.longislandindex.org click on to special analysis.