

# Fire Districts in Dutchess County

Fact Sheet prepared by the League of Women Voters of the Mid-Hudson Region

*NY State law requires all cities and villages to provide fire protection. Cities typically have a municipal fire department with either paid or volunteer firefighters or a combination of both. Villages may have their own department, contract with another municipality, contract with a fire district or form a joint fire district with a town and other villages. Towns are not allowed to have a municipal fire department but provide fire protection by a fire district or a fire protection district.*

Dutchess County includes 2 cities, 20 towns, 8 villages, 26 fire districts and 7 fire protection districts. Fire districts are overseen by an elected board of commissioners of five members serving five year terms. Fire protection districts are created by the town board to protect a geographic service area within a town by contracting with a city or village fire department, a fire district or an independent fire company.

## **Issues:**

- The election of fire commissioners is held the second Tuesday of December, but very few voters turn out for these elections.
- Funding for fire protection comes from local tax levies and are used to purchase buildings, equipment and insurance, as well as salaries for paid firefighters, training, pensions and health insurance. Fire districts may borrow money by issuing bonds to finance capital projects. District voters must vote on such bond issues in a special election. But turnout for such special elections is very small.
- Annual budgets are approved by the fire commissioners but budget information and the budget vote are not widely disseminated to the public.
- Spending by fire departments is increasing much faster than the cost of living for many reasons. Increased hiring of professional staff due to a decline in volunteer firefighters; higher costs for health care and pensions, equipment, training and overtime.
- Internal controls over financial activities of fire districts are often not adequate<sup>1</sup>

## **Proposals for change to increase efficiency, cut costs and improve service:<sup>2</sup>**

- Consolidate or share services among fire districts<sup>3</sup>
- Move the election of fire commissioners to the November general election
- Allow voters to vote on fire district budgets
- Study the creation of a county-wide emergency medical service or a county-wide fire protection service or the contracting of emergency medical services to private companies<sup>4</sup>
- Allow towns to directly provide fire protection through the creation of a town-run fire department

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<sup>1</sup> Audit of Arlington Fire District by Office of NY State Comptroller  
[www.osc.state.ny.us/localgov/audits/firedists/2012/arlington.pdf](http://www.osc.state.ny.us/localgov/audits/firedists/2012/arlington.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> NY State Local Government Efficiency Studies [www.dos.ny.gov/lge/projects](http://www.dos.ny.gov/lge/projects)

<sup>3</sup> Pace University study of Fairview Fire District Consolidation 2012 <https://sites.google.com/site/fairviewstudy/>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid pp24-31