



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Emergency Services Volunteer Incentive Act

THOMAS F. O'MARA May 4, 2011

| ISSUE: **FIREFIGHTERS**



Albany, N.Y.—State Senator Tom O’Mara (R-C, Big Flats) and Assemblyman Phil Palmesano (R-C, Corning) have introduced legislation aimed at helping localities fend off potentially enormous future local property tax increases by offering incentives to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters and other emergency services personnel.

Read more in Elmira's *Star-Gazette*.

The legislation (S.4646/A.7154), known as the “Emergency Services Volunteer Incentive Act,” is being sponsored by O’Mara and Palmesano as part of ongoing state-level efforts, including a recent “Recruit NY” campaign sponsored by the Firemen’s Association of the State of New York, to keep drawing attention to a challenge that many believe poses a property-tax-crisis-in-waiting for rural, upstate communities. The Legislature resumed its session in Albany this week.

Both local legislators serve as members on the 10-member, bipartisan Legislative Commission on Rural Resources.

In a joint statement, O’Mara and Palmesano said, “This issue warns of the next explosive property tax crisis facing localities across upstate New York. If Albany’s serious about addressing high property taxes,

we better keep sounding the alarm on the volunteer recruitment challenge. It would cost local property taxpayers billions of dollars to pay for the critical services currently provided by our volunteer firefighters and EMTs. Incentives aren't the only answer, but we believe they need to be part of the strategy.”

The Firemen's Association, which sponsored the Recruit NY statewide recruitment effort in April, 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.

The O'Mara-Palmesano legislation would:

- > provide a \$400 state income tax credit for volunteer firefighters and ambulance workers who have been active for four or more consecutive years;
- > 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.