

Fire alarm

Fundraising sweetens their pot

BY ELIZABETH MOORE / STAFF WRITER

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For years, when Centerport's volunteer firefighters came around on their annual fund drive, Ann Fahlbusch says she wrote out checks of \$100 or more, happy to support a vital community service.

But when Fahlbusch joined the department five years ago, she was startled to find where her donated dollars had been going. They went to the gun, baseball and fishing clubs, to white-water rafting trips upstate, to the Christmas eggnog party and to barbecues and banquets.

"They said, 'We tell the community as little as possible -- it just causes trouble,'" said Fahlbusch, who quit the department after two years and moved out of state. "I said, 'You guys got \$71,000 in the month of December from the community, and you don't think they have a right to know what you use it for?' I gave \$100 a year, and I thought I was helping fight a fire."

Social and fringe benefits

It's a common misconception in communities across Long Island where fire department fundraising appeals often don't make clear where donations will go.

Fund-drive money is spent mostly on social and fringe benefits for volunteers, including tropical vacations, parties, takeout for department meetings, sports teams, beer, and extra insurance and death benefits, department records show. In rare instances, it has even gone to campaign contributions and, some volunteers say, strippers. At least some of these expenditures may violate the federal tax code, an Internal Revenue Service spokesman said.

Property taxes cover all spending that is directly related to firefighting, including the cost of equipping and training volunteers and feeding them at emergencies and at annual banquets.

Unlike most other New York not-for-profit groups, volunteer fire departments don't have to file financial disclosure forms with the state attorney general, and only about a fifth of them file required federal tax returns that would allow the public to review how much they raise and how they spend it. Officials with the state firefighters' association say that's merely an oversight by busy people not fully aware of their responsibilities.

Centerport is one of the few departments that does, listing the expenditures Fahlbusch complained about. Department officials say they've nothing to hide.

"We have discussed it with people that ask at their doors," said Brian Mark, Centerport's department president. "We don't lie to the public. That's the last thing we would do."

Some vague appeals

Although no agency tallies donations raised by Long Island's 179 community fire departments, available tax returns and sampling of large departments suggest that most take in more than \$25,000 each year, the threshold for filing charitable returns with the IRS.

In 2003, for example, Wantagh's fund drive brought in \$233,000; East Meadow collected \$171,000; Levittown, \$150,000; Merrick, \$184,000. None of these departments filed federal returns.

Some departments make plain in their solicitations how the money will be spent:

"While tax dollars pay for equipment, maintenance, dispatchers' salaries, fire hydrant rental and other operating expenses, many activities of the department are dependent on residents' donations," read a recent appeal from the Halesite Fire Department in Huntington. "Donations pay for athletic teams, insurance, death benefits, refreshments and community functions like our Blood Drive each August, the Fire Prevention Week Open House in October, and the Holiday party for fire district children in December."

Other appeals for support, though, are vague.

"We are the first responders to emergencies large and small, your donation makes it possible," read a recent fund drive letter from the West Sayville Fire Department, whose \$1.9 million in tax revenue covers the year's expenses.

Some residents are annoyed by the confusion.

"The residents of this community are on the hook for millions for a bond issue to fund a new firehouse," said Dan Gasparek, an East Meadow man who was angered by repeated solicitations. "Where is this money going? ... For fire equipment? For big-screen TVs for the lounges inside the firehouse? For fishing trips? That's the question."

Keeping them happy

Some argue that the trips, parties and clubs are serving the public interest if they keep the volunteers happy and poised to answer calls.

In recent years, Hicksville's fire companies have traveled to the Poconos, Atlantic City, Las Vegas, Orlando, Cancun, the Dominican Republic and Canada, funded by the charity of residents, records show.

"It doesn't bother me," said Hicksville resident Dawn Rose. "These people come into your house when it's on fire and risk their lives. Why can't they have a week in Canada?"

Officials in other fire departments share that view.

"We don't get paid for this," former New Hyde Park Chief Anthony Vaglica, whose members have traveled to Cozumel, St. Maarten, the Bahamas and the Grand Caymans, said of the firefighters' life.

"Anybody who would have a problem with it, maybe they should start getting up at 2, 3, 4, 5 o'clock in the morning from their nice warm bed when it's 10 degrees outside, and do what we do."

And when the Oceanside Fire Department's Terrace Hose & Chemical Co. No. 3 celebrated its 75th anniversary with a 2003 cruise to Nova Scotia, the company paid each member's way.

"We saved up a long time for that," said ex-Chief Robert Bettes, who said the money came not from donations but from "savings." IRS returns for 2000 and 2001 show Terrace has income from investments as well as raffles and the annual fund drive.

IRS spokesman Kevin McKeon said, in general, fire departments must use donations "to serve the public purpose for which they are exempt," from taxes. IRS rules allow departments to provide facilities for rest and relaxation.

"But their primary purpose is to be out there putting out fires," McKeon said. "Funds should be used for the purchase of needed equipment and maintenance of the equipment ... It could lead to revocation [of a tax exemption] if it's determined that the organization is using public funds for the personal benefit of the members of the fire department."

As for resort travel spending, "I don't think there's any authorization for that under the code," he said.

Campaign donations

Some departments have used donations for political campaigns, even though IRS rules bar that.

The Mastic Beach Fire Department donated \$900 to the failed campaign of Majority Leader Peter O'Leary (R-Moriches) this year.

But Mastic Beach Chief Jeff McGown said those payments were fees for a golf tournament fundraiser for O'Leary.

"The fundraising that the department does, that money can be used for anything," he said. "It's not a political thing ... We have guys that enjoy playing golf, and the money we have is our money to be spent how we want to, and we choose to spend some of it to play golf, and if it happens to be that Pete O'Leary reports it as a campaign fund that has nothing to do with us."

Entertainment money

One fire company, a former officer said, spent fund-drive money on adult entertainment.

The North Bellmore Fire Department's Company No. 1 has used donations to pay for strippers for the annual holiday party in recent years, two people associated with the department said.

Former North Bellmore firefighter Sophia Specht claimed in her sexual discrimination suit against the department that it dropped her from its rolls after she demanded that male volunteers stop bringing strippers and prostitutes into the firehouse. Specht received a confidential settlement last year, court records show.

"I was no longer willing to go door-to-door to ask the public for donations to spend on strippers and pornography," Specht said before the settlement.

The district's lawyer, John Roche, said Specht's claims weren't credible, but he also said that since someone else also told Newsday about the strippers, he would investigate.

"Sure they do have Christmas parties. Do I know exactly what happens at every Christmas party? If we get a complaint we act on it," he said. "... This is going to precipitate me investigating further. We don't tolerate that kind of stuff here."