

fire alarm

More bang for the buck

BY ELIZABETH MOORE / STAFF WRITER

November 20, 2005

Long Beach and Garden City are the only two fire departments on Long Island that have paid crews standing by in the firehouse to augment their volunteers.

They are among the fastest, but they are not the most expensive.

Long Beach arrived at fire calls in an average of 3 minutes, 41 seconds, about twice as fast as the Long Island average, according to an analysis representing more than 90 percent of the alarms answered last year. It got ambulances to medical calls faster than anyone else, arriving in 3 minutes, 47 seconds.

Garden City, which only responds to fire calls, comes in not far behind, arriving in 3 minutes, 43 seconds.

New Hyde Park volunteers get an engine to fire calls an average of five seconds faster than Long Beach. The district's ambulance crews, augmented by paid technicians, aren't nearly as fast as Long Beach ambulances, though. They take an average of 5 minutes, 36 seconds.

Both Long Beach and Garden City have bigger budgets than most Long Island departments, but despite fears about the cost of paying firefighters, neither is the most expensive department here by any measure.

While Garden City is costly, it is not out of line with other departments. Its \$5.4 million in annual costs, including pensions and other employee benefits, make it Long Island's third most expensive, after Hicksville and Coram.

Twenty other volunteer departments, however, cost more per resident protected, and seven cost more per call answered.

Thomas Foley, who was Garden City's volunteer chief until May, is proud of the service his department provides, though he says the expense makes him wary of saying it offers the most "bang for your buck."

"In Garden City, people don't care if you are volunteer or paid -- all they care about is if they dial 911, someone comes," Foley said. "And try to put a price on that."

Long Beach is a comparative bargain. Eighteen volunteer agencies spend more overall each year than its \$3.6 million department, the busiest on Long Island. It also costs less than the average department per call and per resident.

"We like to say we deliver the best fire service for the cheapest dollars," said City Manager Charles Theophan. " ... We have nowhere to go for money except the taxpayers, and we don't want to do that."

Both combination departments, which hired their first firefighters in the 1920s, are headed by volunteer chiefs who have authority over the paid crews at emergencies, which Foley calls crucial for volunteer morale.

In both departments, the paid crews drive separate rigs, occupy separate working quarters and aren't allowed to use the volunteers' bar or other recreational facilities. And in both Garden City and Long Beach, the unionized firefighters are counted on to handle the drudgery.

"You don't burn up your guys on junk calls and service calls" such as automatic alarms, which are usually false, Foley said.

Off-duty relations wax and wane depending upon the personalities, paid and volunteer firefighters said, but cooperation at emergencies is smooth.

"We're all here to do the same thing: provide the best fire protection," said Joseph Cieslewicz, a former union president in Garden City.

Copyright © 2008, Newsday Inc.