

## On firefighter issue, "heart of the village" has been violated

### *To the Editor:*

The mayor made some ugly comments about Larchmont's volunteer firefighters at the end of Monday's Village Board. As a long-time LFD volunteer present at the meeting, I asked to reply. The mayor flatly refused and abruptly ended the meeting. She and Trustee Millstein walked out, leaving me standing at the microphone and Trustees McAndrews, Kolbert and Ward staring at one another, perhaps in shock.

Unbelievable? See the LMC-TV video.

Larchmonters are bewildered about the board's plans to radically restructure the fire department and hire a \$152,000 paid fire chief to replace the volunteer chief. At this point, most of the active volunteers are monitoring calls and responding only to actual emergencies. Most have announced they will cease firefighting by mid-June.

This is a serious situation, and board

meetings are the traditional forum for civil exchanges on important matters; they are not just for the mayor and trustees to express their opinions. The Village Hall courtroom, the "heart of the village," has been violated.

What were the ugly comments? The mayor claimed volunteers haven't inventoried gear like pagers and helmets. She speculated that volunteers might walk off with equipment. These charges are inaccurate and absurd. We maintain detailed inventories of equipment issued; annually our gear is re-inventoried and checked. Volunteers who will cease firefighting have no use for the gear. Those who are joining nearby departments will be welcomed with open arms and issued new gear. All gear will be returned and accounted for.

The mayor also accused firefighters, who are petitioning door-to-door to place the department issues on the ballot for voters to decide, of spreading

fear about Larchmont's ability to continue protecting lives and property. The volunteers, unlike the mayor, are merely telling the truth about the risks we all face. While the mayor and her chief are spinning "all is well and nothing has changed," the volunteers are facing facts.

In truth, the number of volunteers responding to alarms has declined sharply under the paid chief. Of volunteers who have NOT announced resignations, the average response is only 2 per alarm. If the mayor knows this, she's not admitting it. If she doesn't know, why isn't her chief telling her?

After mid-June, can Larchmont fight fires with three paid firefighters (per shift) and an average of two responding volunteers? In truth, it takes about 12 firefighters to start fighting a house fire - to command and coordinate, deploy hose, search for people, operate apparatus, position ladders, ventilate smoke, prepare for emergency rescue, etc.

An understaffed incident is dangerous for everyone. The Mayor and Trustees are apparently willing to accept risks

that the volunteers are unwilling to sign up for. But the Mayor and Trustees don't run into the burning buildings; the firefighters do.

Mutual aid from nearby departments is essential, but arrives critical minutes later, and is intended to supplement our own forces. Furthermore, to get mutual aid a department has to be willing to provide it, which requires that we send apparatus and firefighters to other communities, while still covering our responsibilities in Larchmont. We can't do that with 3 paid firefighters and a handful of active volunteers.

If we intend to rely on Mamaroneck Town firefighters, the board should immediately begin genuine discussions about merger - as the volunteers have recommended for months. If the board believes Larchmont should go it alone, even after most volunteers are gone, they should begin hiring the dozens of additional paid firefighters that will be required.

**Ned Benton,  
Volunteer Firefighter and former  
Larchmont Village Trustee**

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new positions. The Board eliminated the position of the five new directors, decided not to replace a mechanic,

Dr. Fried.

It was truly down to the eleventh hour, but the Board did finally agree on the revised budget. While some were