

IN NORTH HEMPSTEAD

Siren Controversy Fires Up Residents

Blare summons firefighters, irks others

By EMI ENDO
STAFF WRITER

RICK DETRIS recalls one night a few years ago when he was in bed, exhausted, and the fire siren near his Port Washington home blared while his infant son slept.

"The siren went off once — I was praying that he wouldn't wake up," said Detris, a member of the Willowdale Terrace Concerned Residents.

"The third time, forget it, there was no way he was not going to wake up."

Rather than just putting up with what they consider an inconvenience, Detris and the civic association recently wondered whether there wasn't a more technologically advanced, less intrusive way to summon volunteers who fight fires and respond to emergencies. So the group posed that question in a letter published in its newsletter in October, 1997, and in a local newspaper last month.

The answer? It's complicated.

Over the years, fire departments around the North Shore have attempted to make sure the call to aid is heard by volunteers without unnecessarily disrupting the neighborhood. Many now use voice tone pagers; some rely on them exclusively for lesser emergencies at night. In Roslyn, a new alphanumeric pager system will be tested. But until a perfect alternative is developed, fire departments are sticking with sirens.

And judging by a firestorm of controversy sparked by Detris' question, it seems that many residents agree.

In response to his letters, several residents fired off their own letters, accusing the complainers of being selfish and trying to shame them for criticizing a procedure involved in saving lives.

Lurking under the surface seemed to be resentment on the part of longtime residents at the relative newcomers to the neighborhood suggesting changes in the community.

Michael Cotsonas, 29, was one of them. "Are the Willowdale Terrace Concerned Residents crazy?" he wrote in a letter to the Port Washington News.

Even though he lives a block away from a firehouse with an air horn, he said he doesn't notice the noise anymore.

"If my house was on fire," Cotsonas said, "I'd be thanking God that those horns were going."

Detris said he understands. "Believe me, I'm sympathetic to people whose houses are on fire." But he said he did not know that he was buying a house near a siren. "You move to the suburbs for some quiet. This is a jarring experience at 3 o'clock in the morning."

And while it has gotten easier for his family to get back to sleep after the siren goes off, he said, "Do you want to get used to it? If there's a better way, no."

So far, according to local fire department officials, there may not be.

Port Washington Fire Department Chief Jim Interdonati said that the loud sirens and air horns are currently part of the agency's primary alarm system — one that he said dates back more than half a century.

"We don't do it to aggravate the people," Interdonati said. "It's a necessary inconvenience for now."

In the early 1970s, the department introduced a radio system that was used along with the sirens and air horns. But it's now outdated, and the department is replacing it with a voice tone pager system. A volunteer wearing the pager hears a voice giving the location of the fire or emergency. "We're going little by little, trying to give everybody a pager,"

'We don't do it to aggravate the people.'

— John
Interdonati,
fire chief



While some Port Washington residents complain about the sirens, others say they're necessary to alert volunteer firefighters.

Newsday Photo / Audrey C. Tiernan

Interdonati said, noting that they run about \$600 each. He estimated that about a third of the 300 volunteers have the pagers.

The horns — which sound "like the Queen Mary's coming in" — signify a smaller fire such as a brush fire or car fire, Interdonati said.

The sirens, which are much louder and more piercing, go off in addition to the horns in the event of a structural fire, he said.

If there's a problem with the audible signal coming over the pagers, volunteers within earshot would still hear the sirens, he said.

Nearby Roslyn has been struggling with the same issue.

Steve Mockler, chief of the Roslyn Highlands Hook and Ladder Engine and Hose, said that for some reason the pagers do not work in certain parts of the district.

So to address complaints raised in East Hills, along with gaps in the current pager system, Roslyn officials will be testing an alphanumeric pager sys-

tem. Volunteers would wear two pagers. In case the voice tone pager fails, the alphanumeric one would display a written message. If it works, Mockler said, the number of hours in a day that the sirens and horns are used could be reduced.

Assistant chief fire marshal Peter Meade said that Nassau County, which dispatches calls for Roslyn and many other departments, will install new equipment that can be used with such pagers in the spring.

Either way, it's sometimes hard to hear a pager or even realize that it's vibrating. (Meade said when his went off in church one day, he thought it was just the vibrations from the church organ.) And, Meade said, "All the pagers in the world can't alert you if it's home and you're somewhere else."

Mockler said most fire officials like sirens best. Calling it an economical proven method, he said, "Is it the most advanced? No, not by any means, but no one's got the answer." •