

**Historic Architectural Assessment
Rotterdam Fire District No. 7
Town of Rotterdam, Schenectady County,
New York**

14PR02689

prepared for

**C.T. Male Associates Engineering, Surveying,
Architecture & Landscape Architecture, D.P.C.
50 Century Hill Drive,
Latham, NY, 12110**

prepared by

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April 2015



Figure 1. Location of the Fire Station on the Schenectady USGS Topographic Map.

Introduction

This report provides the results of a historic architectural assessment conducted for the Rotterdam Fire District #7 Fire Station, located at 112 Gordon Road in the Hamlet of Schonowe in the Town of Rotterdam, Schenectady County, New York (Figures 1 and 2). A Phase 1A/1B cultural resources survey was conducted by Birchwood Archaeological Services in December of 2014 as part of a new fire station development. A NYS Historic Resource Inventory Form was prepared and submitted to the New York State Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (NYSOPRHP) for review under Section 14.09 of the New York State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA).

In response to the Phase 1A/1B study Sloane Bullock, Historic Sites Restoration Coordinator at NYSOPRHP, issued a letter dated February 10, 2015, stating that the Schonowe Volunteer Fire Company building is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as an early twentieth century example of civic architecture in Rotterdam (See Appendix A). The letter further states that because the firehouse is eligible for listing in the National Register, its demolition is strongly discouraged because of the cultural history and architectural history its presence contributes to the community.

The following report provides a brief historic context outlining the history of the Schenowe area and the formation of the fire district, an architectural summary detailing some of the features of the building from a historical perspective, and a summary of alternatives examined by the Fire District prior to their seeking review from the NYSOPRHP.



Figure 2. Site plan showing the relationship of the proposed new fire station with the existing building.



Dedication Souvenir Program
OF
Schonowe Volunteer Fire Company
DISTRICT 7
MAY 14, 1949
TOWN OF ROTTERDAM
ON
GORDON ROAD



Figure 3. Souvenir Program from the fire station dedication ceremony, dated 1949.

Historic Context

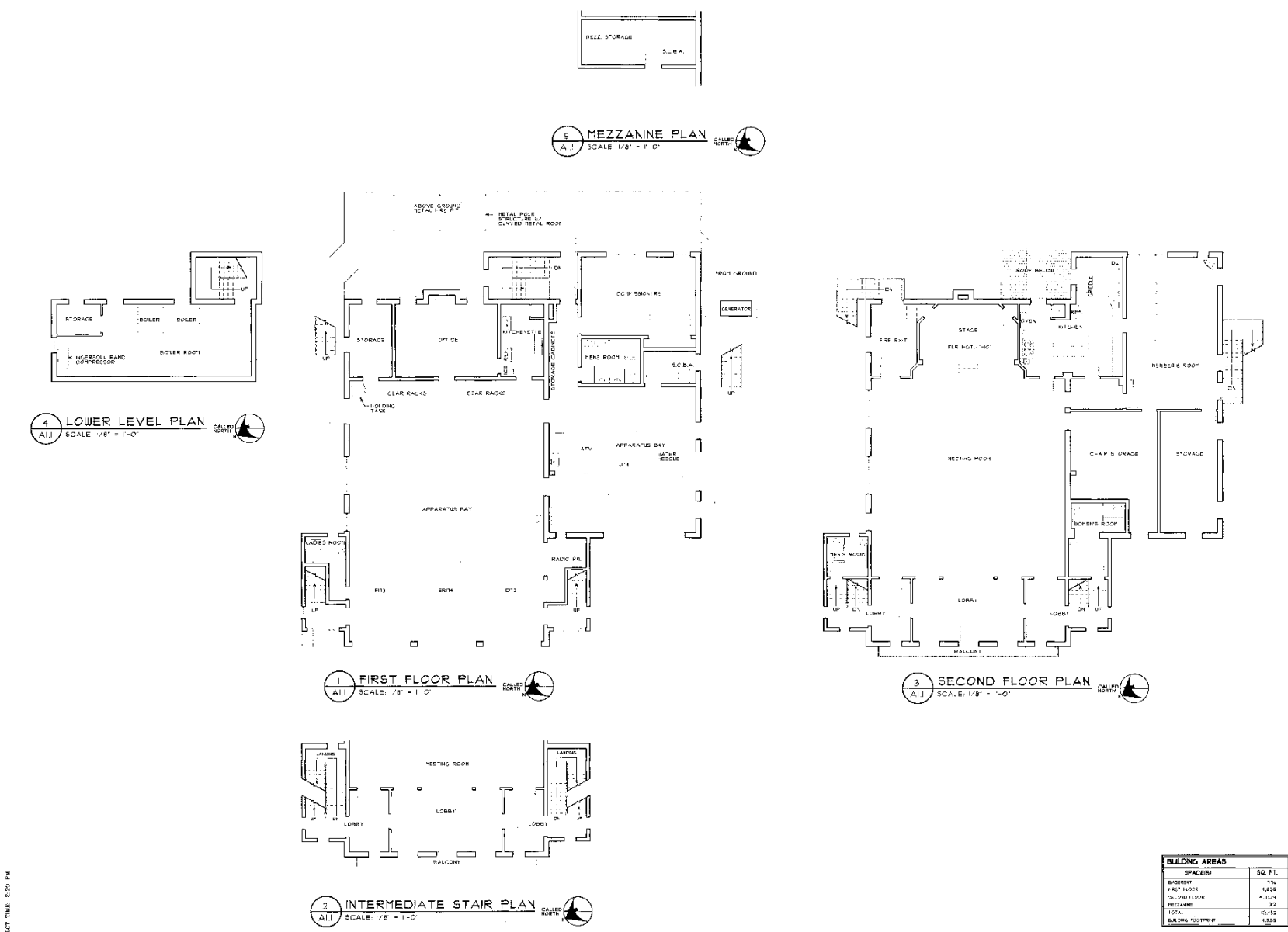
The Schonowe area has been occupied by Dutch settlers since the mid 17th century. In 1661 Arent Van Curler was granted a tract of land along the Mohawk River, known then as Groote Vlacht; Dutch for "the Great Flats." The Mohawk Indians called this tract of land S guan-ho-ha, "The Open Door Beyond the Flats," which was mispronounced by early Dutch settlers as "Schonowe." (Rotterdam Fire District No. 7 website). Even in the 17th century fire protection was an important issue in early settlement, and while Van Curler passed away soon after obtaining the grant in 1667, his home in Schenectady was one of the few which did not burn during the attack on Schenectady in 1690.

The creation of the Rotterdam Fire District #7 had its roots in 1942, when the Office of Civilian Defense suggested that the district's residents organize a fire fighting unit similar to the surrounding districts. The need for an official Volunteer Fire Company was requested by the residents and on March 15, 1946, the Schonowe Volunteer Fire Co. was organized and Rotterdam Fire District No. 7 was formed (Rotterdam Fire District No. 7 website). Thirty one volunteers agreed to take on this task, and from 1946 to 1948 they began to grow their unit and fight fires throughout the community (Rotterdam Fire District No. 7 website). However, they were forced to hold meetings at local schools and they had nowhere to use as a fire hall until 1948, when the construction of the current hall was completed. This building is still in use today and besides a few slight modifications to the original building, it is for the most part largely untouched and retains most of its original fabric.

The fire station was constructed in the period immediately following the Second World War, which was a period of prosperity in the town of Rotterdam. All the adjacent structures on the opposite side of the road also appear to date to the early to mid 20th century, tying the fire station to the surrounding neighborhood.

The Hamlet of Schonowe is uniquely located within the Town of Rotterdam due to its proximity to the General Electric Plant located approximately two miles to the east. The General Electric Corporation was and remains the largest employer in the region, and the growth and affluence of Schonowe can be likely attributed to the rapid growth and expansion of G.E. in the years following World War II. The final expansion of Interstate 890 in 1974 and the construction of the exit and on ramps at Campbell and Rice Roads further connected the community to the General Electric Plant and to the City of Schenectady. Use of the flats immediately southeast of Schonowe became increasingly commercial once the interstate was complete, culminating the construction of Rotterdam Square Mall in 1988 on lands formerly settled by Harman Albertse Vedder in 1671 and later occupied by the expansive Campbell Mansion.

Other changes have taken place within the community. New homes occur on and adjacent to Phillips Road, and the Fellowship Hall at the nearby Cobblestone Church on Putnam Road was constructed and dedicated in 1965 (Cobblestone Church 2015). None of these later changes are directly visible from the project area.



BUILDING AREAS	
SPACE(S)	SQ. FT.
BASINENT	174
FIRST FLOOR	4,838
SECOND FLOOR	4,104
MEZZANINE	33
TOTAL	10,445
BUILDING FOOTPRINT	4,824

PACHICO ROSS
ARCHITECTS, P.C.

20 HUNTERS LANE, SUITE 200, NEW YORK, NY 10001

ADDITION AND RENOVATIONS
ROTTERDAM FIRE DISTRICT #7

SCARBOROUGH, NY 12596

AS-BUILT
FLOOR PLANS

SCALE: AS NOTED

DATE: 01/14/00

BY: JLR/BD

CHECKED: JLR/BD

STATUS: PRELIMINARY

X-1

Figure 4. Details of the floor plan for the existing Rotterdam Fire District No. 7 Fire Station.

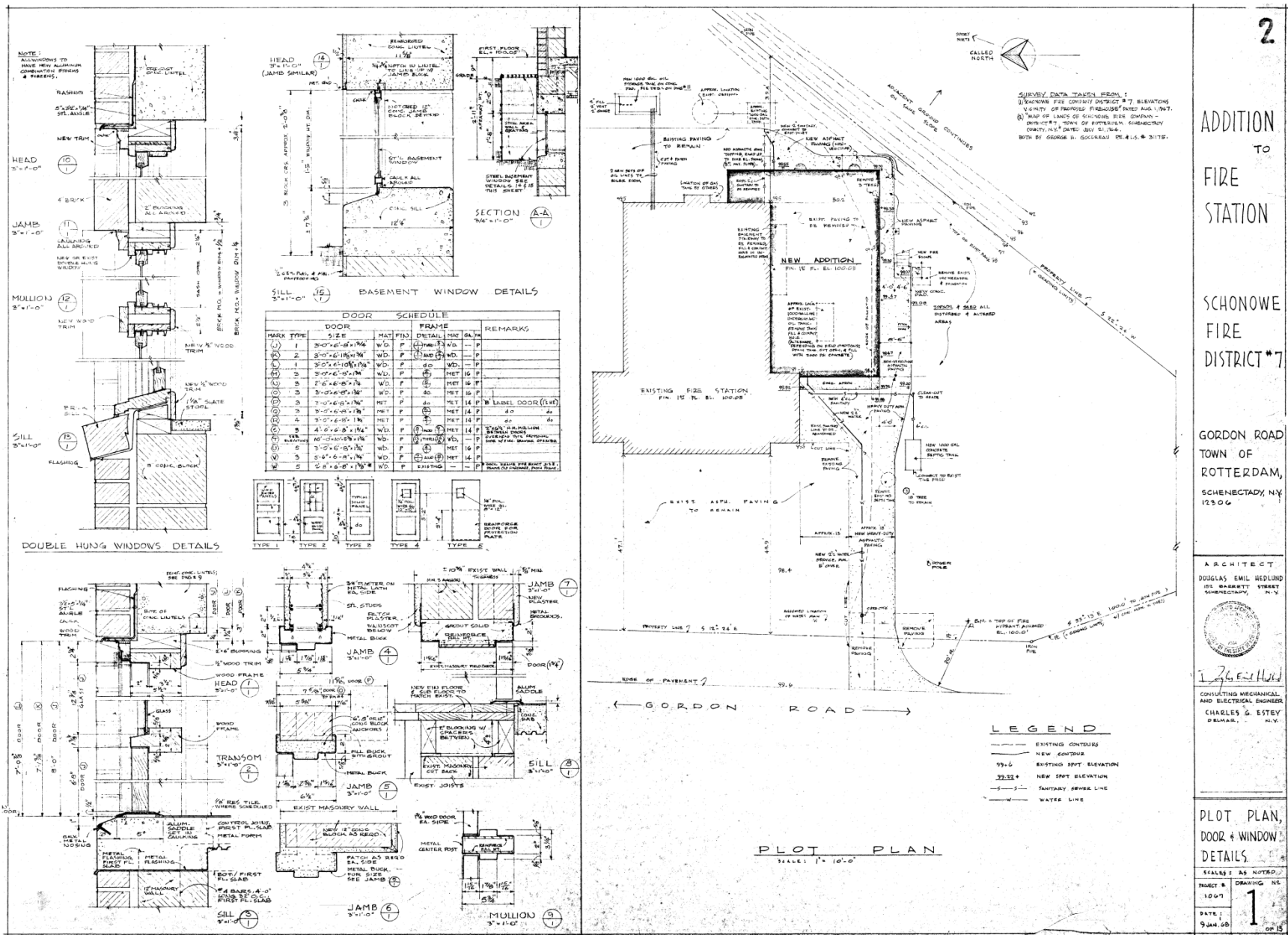
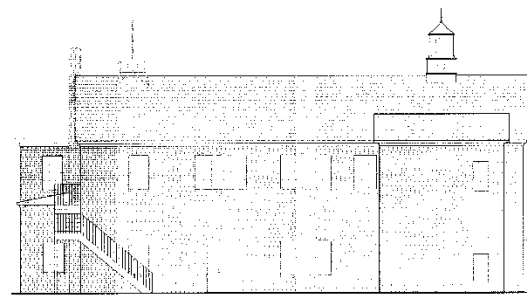
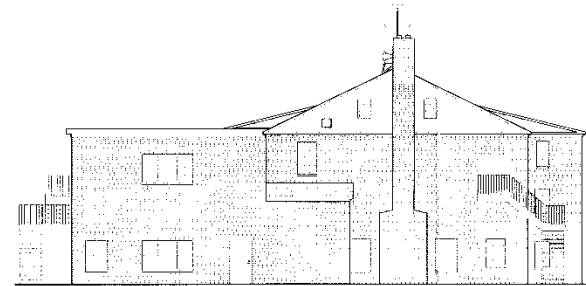


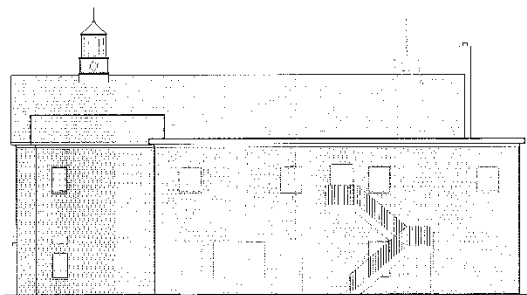
Figure 5. Drawing showing the 1968 addition to the Rotterdam Fire District No 7. Fire Station.



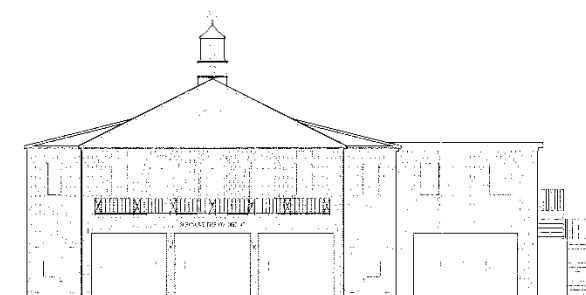
3 NORTH ELEVATION
A2.1 SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"



1 EAST ELEVATION
A2.1 SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"



4 SOUTH ELEVATION
A2.1 SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"



2 WEST ELEVATION
A2.1 SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"

PACHECO ROSS
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12 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, NY 10004
(212) 512-1000 FAX (212) 512-1001

ADDITION AND RENOVATIONS
ROTTERDAM FIRE DISTRICT #7
ROTTERDAM, NY 12206

AS BUILT
ELEVATIONS
SCALE: AS NOTED
DATE: 01/20/04
BY: J. P. ROSS

NO. 1234 1/2" x 11" 1/2"
DATE: 01/20/04
BY: J. P. ROSS

X-2

Figure 6. Computerized elevation drawings of the Rotterdam Fire District No. 7 Fire Station.

Architectural Summary

An extensive structure report was prepared by the engineers at C.T. Male Associates (2008), which provides a thorough examination the building and its engineering systems. Individuals interested in a more detailed discussion of the fire station are referred to this structure report. The current report is designed to supplement the 2008 report by examining the building from a historical perspective in order to gain a better understanding of how the building changed through time and to examine the continuity between the original structure and the 1968 addition.

Built in 1948, the fire house is built in a refined Colonial Revival style, a popular style of civic buildings in this period. The fire station is a balloon frame construction building sheathed with a brick veneer exterior. The main building is a two story, symmetrical building with three garage door bays on the first floor. The center of the building projects out from the flanking sides which are set back. The symmetrical sides consist of matching doors with colonial revival door surrounds. The surrounds have Doric pilasters with a pediment resting on top of the door. The pediment is decorated with ornamental dentil moulding work along the bottom ridge. There is a wide frieze between the top of the door jam and the bottom of the pediment (Photo 5).

The second story of these flanking sides consists of narrow 4 over 4 double hung sash windows. The front of the building is front gabled with the brick veneer extending from the foundation at ground level to the eaves. The brick veneer has randomly placed darker colored bricks. This is a trait often found in colonial revival homes where builders would place darkened, sometimes oddly shaped bricks called “clinkers” within the walls. The gable on the front and rear of the building is sheathed with wooden clapboard, which was popular for this style. There is a half lunette, elliptical, louvered vent in the center of the gable also for ventilation to the attic (Photo 1).

The first and second story of the building is separated by a balconet, or an ornamental balcony not intended for use. The second story of the building consists of three large arched windows, flanked by two, 6 over 6 double hung sash windows. The windows are decorated with large stone sills and lentils with the arched windows having stone keystones towards the top. Directly above the middle garage bay door in the center of the building is a matching stone sign with an incised carving reading “Schonowe Fire District No. 7.” The top of the fire station is adorned with a multi-sided cupola holding a bell. The roof of the cupola is sheathed in copper, coming to a rounded point with a weathervane situated on the peak. The roof of the building is sheathed with new asphalt architectural shingles, grey in color. The rear and the sides of the building are very similar in design to the front of the building. They are sheathed in brick veneer, with 6 over 6 double hung sash windows. The rear of the building also has a brick veneered, exterior center chimney in keeping with the essence of the colonial revival tradition (Photos 2-4).

The later addition was constructed in 1968 and consists of a large garage door bay on the first floor. The masonry wall/steel frame construction of the addition is not similar to the original masonry wall and wood frame structure, with a steel truss and wood frame gable roof, although the exterior of the addition shows good continuity of materials and style with the original fire station. Fenestration on the second story consists of two symmetrically placed 8 over 8 double hung sash windows. The stone lentils and sills are correctly matched with the original building



Photo 1. Rotterdam Fire District #7, facing east.



Photo 2. Rotterdam Fire District #7, facing south.



Photo 3. Rotterdam Fire District #7, facing north.



Photo 4. Rotterdam District #7, facing west



Photo 5. Rotterdam Fire District #7, one main entrances with classical detail, facing east.

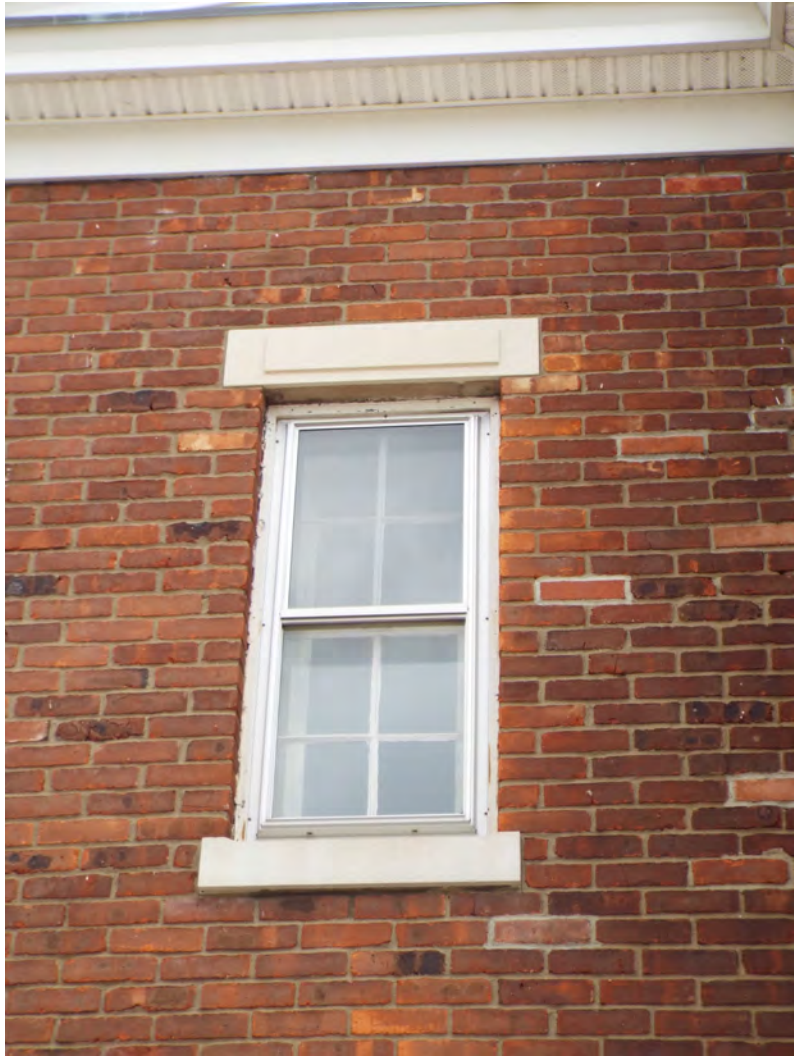


Photo 6. Rotterdam Fire District #7, one of many existing double hung, sash windows with stone lintils and stone sills, facing east.



Photo 7. Rotterdam Fire District #7, view of interior conference room, first floor.



Photo 8.
Rotterdam
Fire District
#7, view of
interior
break room,
first floor.
Notice trim
and fireplace
on back wall.

(Photo 6). A matching brick veneer is used as an exterior covering and the soffit with associated bed and crown moldings are all identical to the 1948 original building.

The first floor of the interior of the fire station is centrally occupied by the open garage where the fire trucks and other equipment are stored (Figure 4; Photo 11). Along the exterior walls of the garage there are smaller rooms used as conference rooms, storage closets, break rooms, rest rooms, and stair wells (Photo 7). The floor is a poured concrete, structurally designed to hold the weight of the heavy trucks and catch potential fluid leaks. Most of the two paneled doors and associated trim and moldings are original to 1948. The room on the first floor with the most historic charm and character is the break room/office space. The room has knotty pine wainscoting surrounding the lower half of the room. On the eastern side of the room is a brick faced fireplace surround meant to be purely ornamental and never intended for use. This room is also adorned with period crown molding encompassing the entire room (Photo 8-10).

The second floor of the interior is almost completely intact as originally constructed in 1948 (Figure 5). The majority of the space is taken up by a large events area/auditorium with a full size stage. The arched shape of the ceiling still remains, however the underlayment is a recent addition. The lowered ceiling has since been taken down to reveal the original arched shape intended (Photo 13). The floor is made up of narrow, hardwood floor boards, stained a dark pigment. (Photo 12) Surrounding the entire auditorium area and below the stage area is a paneled wainscoting left entirely intact accompanied with its proper baseboard, base cap molding, and chair rail. (Photo 14) This is another character defining trait of the colonial revival architectural style in the mid twentieth century. To the right of the auditorium in the rear of the building is a recreational bar (Photo 15). There are other smaller rooms used as storage space and some restrooms also within this upstairs interior space. The entire space still retains all of its original decorative two panel doors, moldings and trims, and most of its original double hung sash windows remain. (Photo 16) Also several of the light fixtures that hang from the ceiling in this upstairs space are mid-twentieth century features.

The second floor of the fire station is currently not usable as a result of a decision by the Hearing Officer for the New York State Department of Labor pursuant to NY Labor Law § 27-a (8)(c) and 12 NYCRR 803 due to safety and health standards, in which a Department Inspection determined that the existing stairs leading to the meeting room on the second floor have one tread that measures six feet three inches of head room and one that measures five feet eight inches of head room. As a consequence, the Rotterdam Fire District #7 was cited with a violation of the standard promulgated in 29 CFR 1910.24(i). Restrooms are also located in the area over the stairwells preventing access to them by the occupants.

The Rotterdam Fire District #7 building represents a suburban, mid twentieth century, colonial revival civic building. The building retains much of its historic character and features and is a moderately well maintained example of the Colonial Revival architectural style in Schenectady County, New York. The colonial revival architectural style was most prevalent in the decades in the first half of the twentieth century. This makes this building one of the last buildings of this architectural style built in the area before this style was phased out by modernism.



Photo 9. Rotterdam Fire District #7, view of first floor interior, two paneled door with associated trim. Between main garage space and break room.



Photo 10. Rotterdam Fire District #7, view of colonial revival door trim that remains throughout entire building.



Photo 11. Rotterdam Fire District #7, view of main garage space on first floor interior.

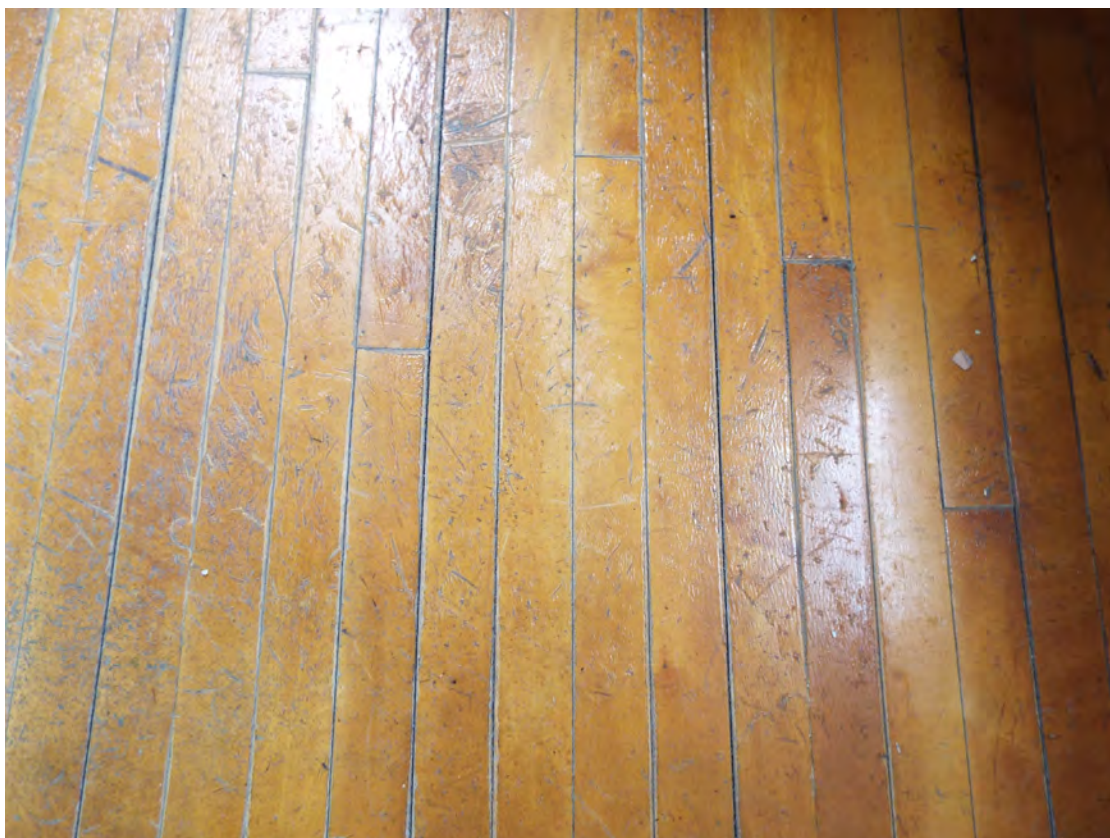


Photo 12. Rotterdam Fire District #7, view of original, narrow plank, hardwood floor on second floor interior.



Photo 13. Rotterdam Fire District #7, view of upstairs auditorium.



Photo 14. Rotterdam Fire District #7, view of paneled wainscoting which surrounds entire auditorium on second floor.



Photo 15. Rotterdam Fire District #7, view of upstairs recreational bar area.



Photo 16. Rotterdam Fire District #7, view of top rail of interior of window in upstairs. Shows original hardware and the quality of sashes still in place.

While the building retains much of its historic character, the 2008 report prepared by C.T. Male Associates points out several changes to the structure that have taken place over the years, including the replacement of the original arched divided light window with a louvered vent in the center of the gable, the installation of vinyl siding at the gable ends, with aluminum soffits and fascias, and the replacement of the original balcony French operable doors with replacement windows and an aluminum door intended as an emergency egress. Other changes include the replacement of the original matching solid panel doors on each side with aluminum entrance doors and sidelights and the alteration of the original flat roof above each stair tower flanking the main building with a monoslope roof structure. Additionally, in 1991 the size of the original 10 ft wide bay doors were increased to 11.5 ft by reducing the existing piers on each side of the openings. (New Door Configuration, Schonowe Fire Department, dated September, 1991, prepared by Draftics, Ltd., 421 Peek Street, Schenectady, New York, and certified by Robert Willets Chapman, P.E.)

Alternatives Analysis

While no formal or in-depth analysis of alternatives study has been prepared as part of the project, discussions with Richard Campagnola of C.T. Male Associates indicated that the Board of Fire Commissioners has looked at multiple options, including additions to the existing building. In each case four primary factors were taken into consideration when reviewing each option: tax increases (short & long term), firematic needs of the district, life safety concerns, and overall costs. They also considered “No Action”, which was determined to not be a viable option if they are to remain and effective fire service to the community.

It is important to note the differences between a fire district and a fire protection district. A fire district is a political subdivision of the State and a district corporation. The fire commissioners and other officers and employees of the fire district are employees and officers of the fire district and not officers and employees of the town or of any other political subdivision [Rotterdam Town Law §174 (7)]. It is the opinion of the State Comptroller #1 (1981) that a fire district is also an independent corporate entity governed by a separate board of fire commissioners. This is not to be confused with a fire protection district which is simply a geographic area, with no independent corporate status for which the town board is responsible for providing fire protection (DiRaddo 1998).

Alternatives examined as part of the proposed project are summarized below.

Refitting the existing structure for continued use as a fire station- One alternative would be to refit the current building to meet the projected needs of the fire district. An extensive structure report was prepared by the engineers at C.T. Male Associates (2008), which determined that the current fire station could not be refitted due to several reasons. Chief among these problems are the outdated systems that are currently in use and in need of being updated, the moisture entering the building due to a faulty roof and lack of mortar in spots on the exterior masonry walls, the fact that the garage bays are no longer suitable in size to modern day vehicles, and the stairs leading to the second floor have a low clearance causing failure to allow proper egress. Individuals interested in additional information about the current condition of the building are referred to the findings of the 2008 report.

As part of the Alternatives Analysis, the Board of Fire Districts engaged C.T. Male Associates to develop preliminary designs and detailed budgets for the two addition options to the existing building. The first was to solely address the PESH violation to restore access to the second floor by the addition of a stair and elevator, with no provisions to address the firematic program deficiencies. And the second one was to restore access and add firematic program space. Because of the financing limitations under State Finance Law and the increased costs compared to the viability of new construction, these options were rejected.

Another alternative would be the construction of another addition to the existing fire station and retaining the original superstructure. This measure has been explored in the past, and in 2006 the Board of Fire Commissioners attempted a referendum for an addition to the existing building, which was soundly defeated by the voters due to the excessive costs involved.

Moving the proposed building footprint and retaining the existing building- Another alternative would be to relocate the proposed new fire station to another location on the property and retain the original building for use by the Town, the fire district, or by a private enterprise. While the structure may not be best suited for use as a fire station, this building has potential for being rehabilitated as other uses. Some of these uses might be, but not limited to, a community center, a senior citizen home, a non-profit's headquarters, a restaurant/brewery, a concert venue or maybe even a dance hall. Having one of these other uses within a historic fire station would add to the uniqueness of that different type of business and potentially draw a larger audience or customer base.

Mr. Campagnola stated that this option is not viable for two reasons. There has been no interest by the Town or other agencies expressed to the Board in taking over the facility to re-purpose it for another use. Unfortunately, taking into consideration the current economic conditions in the Town, the Rotterdam Square Mall just down the road is a prime example of under-utilized real estate facing closure.

Secondly, while the design of the new fire station is intended to have the approach to the apparatus bays from the street, similar to the existing building, the location of the existing building is needed for expanded parking for firefighters, as well as expansion of the septic system, which is located south of the existing station and must be replaced, as well as storm water management on the site (DEC-SWPPP requirement), as municipal facilities are not available for connection. The parking area would also provide space for required training purposes.

Relocating the proposed fire station to another location on a different parcel- Yet another option would be to choose an alternate site for the proposed fire station and retaining the existing building. Mr. Campagnola stated that consideration on relocating the station has an impact on the community's ISO rating, which is based upon the location of the station in terms of response time, which is partly how District boundaries were developed. As noted in C.T. Male's (2008) report:

“the placement of the fire station and associated response distances directly impact upon the rating that a municipality receives as a result of the ISO grading. Considering that most all of the built up areas of the Fire District are supplied with water by the Town of

Rotterdam, the ISO criteria for apparatus response distances is a reasonable barometer of the effectiveness of the station location.”

Redrawing the fire district boundaries- Another alternative would be to redraw or consolidate the fire district boundaries to serve the area using the existing fire stations within the Town. As far as redrawing the fire district boundaries, consolidation of the fire district with another District is not as likely, as described by Bill Young, the District’s Attorney and Counsel for the Association of Fire Districts of NYS in the attached Daily Gazette article following the defeat of the last referendum (See Appendix B).

In summary, C.T. Male’s 2008 structure report indicates that the current design was chosen based upon the following issues identified with retaining the existing structure:

- The current building does not meet PESH requirements
- High maintenance costs
- High heating costs
- Unsafe conditions
- Wasted and unusable space
- Low taxes now, but potentially even higher tax increases that will negate any short term saving in not doing anything.
- Long term most expensive option for the district, through high costs of operation, and potential future problems with the station that could be avoided if addressed now, including potential injuries or loss of life.
- Increased cost for specialty/customized Fire Apparatus equipment would be required to be routinely replaced to comply with current fire safety standards.
- Does not provide for the current firematic needs of the district.

Discussion and Summary

The Rotterdam Fire District #7 fire station is a historically valuable building that sheds light onto mid century, colonial revival architecture and the prosperity of the community during the 1940s through the 1950s. The 1968 addition on the south end of the building is stylistically in keeping with the original building in form and design, and carries over identical exterior trim and other colonial revival features. While a series of additions and modifications have occurred through time, the building remains largely intact, both internally and externally. The property still retains its original function as a fire station, although issues with the structure, including the size of the bay doors and the unserviceable condition of the second floor make the future of the building uncertain.

The letter from Sloane Bullock dated February 10, 2015 states that it is “the recommendation of OPRHP that you enter into consultation with our office to explore ways to avoid or mitigate the adverse impact.” Our clients will continue our consultation with NYSOPRHP in order to find an effective balance that serves the historical and cultural needs of the community while meeting the fire protection needs of the district.

References Cited

Birchwood Archaeological Services

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Cobblestone Church

2015 <http://thecobblestonechurch.org/ourstory/>. Accessed 5/17/15.

C.T. Male Associates

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Rotterdam Fire District No.7

2015 <http://www.rotterdamdistrict7.org/history/>. Accessed 4/24/15.

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1963 *The Classical Language of Architecture*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Appendix A.

Finding of Effect Letter Dated February 10, 2015



New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

Division for Historic Preservation

Peebles Island, PO Box 189, Waterford, New York 12188-0189

518-237-8643

www.nysparks.com

Andrew M. Cuomo

Governor

Rose Harvey

Commissioner

February 10 , 2015

Mr. David Moyer
Owner/Principal Investigator
131 Marion Ave
Gilbertsville, NY 13776

Re: DEC
Schonowe Volunteer Fire Company Inc. Rotterdam Fire District #7 Demolition
112 Gordon Rd, Rotterdam, NY 12306
14PR02689

Dear Mr. Moyer:

Thank you for requesting the comments of the Division for Historic Preservation of the Office of Parks, recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP). We have reviewed the submitted materials in accordance with the New York State Historic Preservation Act of 1980 (section 14.09 of the New York Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation Law). These comments are those of the Division for Historic Preservation and relate only to Historic/Cultural resources. They do not include potential environmental impacts to New York State Parkland that may be involved in or near your project. Such impacts must be considered as part of the environmental review of the project pursuant to the State Environmental Quality Review Act (New York Environmental Conservation Law Article 8) and its implementing regulations (6NYCRR Part 617).

The Schonowe Volunteer Fire Company building is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as an early twentieth century example of civic architecture in Rotterdam. It is designed in the Colonial Revival Style with a rooftop cupola and a pedimented projecting façade. Because the firehouse is eligible for listing in the National Register, we are reviewing the project for its potential impact on the firehouse in addition to reviewing the project for its potential impact on archeological resources.

Because the firehouse is eligible for listing in the National Register, its demolition is strongly discouraged by our office because of the cultural history and architectural history its presence contributes to the community. If demolition were to continue to be proposed, we would make a determination that the project has an adverse impact on the firehouse. It would be the recommendation of OPRHP that you enter into consultation with our office to explore ways to avoid or mitigate the adverse impact. We would request a report exploring all alternatives to demolition. The report would include retaining the building,

constructing an architecturally compatible addition to meet the needs for a larger space, or finding an alternative location for a new station.

If you would like to discuss the review process, please contact me at 518-268-2158 or sloane.bullough@parks.ny.gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sloane Bullough". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Sloane" and last name "Bullough" clearly distinguishable.

Sloane Bullough
Historic Sites Restoration Coordinator

via e-mail only

Appendix B.

Daily Gazette Article Regarding Fire District Consolidation and Restructuring

Daily Gazette article

Saturday, January 5, 2013

<http://www.dailygazette.com/>
See HTML Version of article

Proposals to improve stations shot down by voters

Rotterdam fire companies pose costly dilemma



The Schonowe Firehall on
Gordon Road Friday.

ROTTERDAM — Dave Monroe doesn't understand why the Schonowe Fire Department keeps asking for a new multi-million dollar station.

He acknowledges the small brick firehouse he can see from his back window needs work and says he is more than supportive of modest improvements. But modesty isn't the word he uses to describe the two proposals he's voted against over the past six years.

A plan pitched in 2006 would have roughly doubled the size of the 9,840-square-foot building and cost \$5.2 million. Another submitted to voters in August of last year asked to bond the \$3.3 million cost for a new 12,200-square-foot station that would entirely replace the original, built in 1948.

Monroe regarded them as excessive for a shrinking company with fewer than a dozen members certified to attack interior fires. And he found out he wasn't alone as he went door to door campaigning against the fire company's bond resolution last summer.

"Many of them said it would be much easier and cheaper to merge with South Schenectady," he said of the larger fire company located about two miles away but still in the town.

But consolidating some of the eight volunteer fire companies isn't a discussion that is occurring openly in Rotterdam, a town with about 29,000 residents and no paid fire departments. Even the New York Citizens Empowerment Act of 2009 — state legislation that allows 10 percent of registered voters in a given tax district to petition for a referendum on consolidation or dissolution — hasn't spurred any outward effort to reduce the number of fire districts in town.

Not that this is unusual, explained Bill Young, counsel for the Association of Fire Districts of the State of New York. Fire district consolidation hasn't taken hold anywhere in the Capital Region and only a few select places across the state.

Young argues this is because taxpayers ultimately want to keep their local firehouses, even if they sometimes balk at some of the costs. But that also means a district like Schonowe needs to find creative ways of modernizing without drawing opposition from tax-weary residents.

"There is no one easy solution," he said.

Rotterdam is served by seven volunteer fire districts, each funded through property taxes assessed in the coverage area and governed by a board of fire commissioners responsible for an annual budget. In addition, the town contracts with Plotterkill, a not-for-profit fire protection company.

These departments responded to a total of 1,522 calls in 2011, according to figures submitted to the state Office of Fire Prevention Services. Only a fraction of these calls — generally less than 10 percent — were for active fires, while a far greater percentage were for medical emergencies. Fire companies also respond to home emergencies such as cellar pump-outs and overheated appliances.

All eight departments are staffed almost solely by volunteers. Their operational and capital expenses, however, cost taxpayers a combined \$2.88 million, according to figures included in the town's 2013 budget.

Capital expenses can range from minor improvements to the fire station or new turnout gear for firefighters. Much larger purchases, such as major additions or the purchase of fire apparatus, are subject to referendum and are paid for with borrowing.

Carman and South Schenectady — two of the town's busier fire districts — both have relatively new fire stations. But the

other five districts and the Plotterkill company are in dated facilities, some considered impractical or even unsuitable by modern standards.

Schonowe's two capital projects were met with significant resistance from residents. With fewer than two dozen active members — including fire police — Schonowe is among the smaller of the town's companies.

Yet the fire district is budgeted to collect about \$327,000 to support its operations in 2013. Monroe, who has closely followed the company's expenses over the past six years, questions whether the costs are reasonable.

"It gets to a point where it's excessive," he said.

Of course, Schonowe wasn't the only fire company to have its capital project voted down in Rotterdam recently. Pine Grove, a 30-member department that also covers parts of Princetown and Guilderland, was hoping to renovate the station on Dunnsville Road and add 4,200 square feet.

The \$3.3 million project pitched to voters in 2011 would have represented the first substantial renovation of the station since 1984 and only the second since the building was constructed in the early 1970s. The renovation would have brought the building into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities act, moved electric utilities out of a designated flood plain and added space for modern equipment.

But the referendum resoundingly failed. Fire Commissioner Herb LeTarte III said the company is now faced with pecking away at some of the nagging problems: They'll spend \$185,000 to replace the station's roof this year and then try to replace an aging generator next year.

"It's an expensive proposition to fight a fire these days and meet all the regulations," said LeTarte, a firefighter with nearly four decades of experience.

LeTarte also sees the other side of the argument. He understands that almost every municipal entity is being asked to pare down expenses and he can envision a time when the fire companies of Rotterdam will eventually face consolidation.

"I think it's going to be considered down the road," he said. "Rotterdam is a big town, but we have eight fire stations."

That doesn't mean consolidation will be easy or effective, even if a conversation about it does begin in the near future. Fire companies offer a community identity that is not readily abandoned.

"It's not easy to just dissolve a fire department and there's some camaraderie with the gang down there," LeTarte said. "It would be like breaking up a team."

Young, who served as Schonowe's attorney during the most recent project proposal, acknowledged the multi-million-dollar costs of new stations may seem shocking at first. But ultimately, he said, the overall expense of operating the volunteer companies is far less than having one paid department.

"That really is just a drop in the bucket for the cost of what a paid service would be," he said of the capital project expenses.

The city of Schenectady's fire department, for example, has a budget of more than \$10 million for 2013. The department has 110 members and answers nearly 15,000 calls annually — or roughly 10 times the number fielded by all of Rotterdam's districts combined.

Rob Leonard, a spokesman with the Firemen's Association of the State of New York, said the 890 volunteer companies across the state save taxpayers an estimated \$3.7 billion in expenses, including \$2.5 billion in labor-related costs alone. He said having a town with a large number of fire districts may seem duplicative, but is ultimately a more cost-effective way of delivering fire protection for many municipalities.

"It is still an effective system," he said.

Part of the answer to reducing fire district costs could reside in operational consolidations, explained Tom LaBelle, the New York State Association of Fire Chiefs' executive director. He said even consolidating whole districts wouldn't likely diminish the number of firehouses or the need to keep them modern.

Many stations are located centrally within their coverage area so they can be easily accessed by volunteers. LaBelle said

closing them would likely result in a loss of volunteers and possibly longer response times.

“At the end of the day, a lot of departments are learning consolidation isn’t the answer to the problem,” he said.

Appendix C.

Alternatives Findings from the Rotterdam Fire District No 7. Board of Fire Commissioners



Rotterdam Fire District No. 7

Town of Rotterdam

112 Gordon Road

Schenectady, N.Y. 12306

(518) 377-0939

Fax (518) 377-0014

Commissioner@nycap.rr.com

Option No: 0 Do nothing.

Advantages:

- Status quo.

Disadvantages:

- Loss of use of the 2nd floor of the Fire House Facility by failing to comply with the NYSDOL mandates requirements for providing a code compliant access to the second floor.
- Loss of office space for the Auxiliary and Fire Company.
- Loss of record keeping areas for the Auxiliary and Fire Company.
- Continued high costs for heat and electric for space not usable by the fire service.
- Continued costs for maintenance of facility area that is ubuseable.
- Status quo on any cost reduction improvements for the firematic service to the District.
- Deficiency's would need to be address that be included in other options such as
 1. Retaining wall on northeast side of building needs to be repaired.
 2. Paved surfaces for parking and approach for the trucks needs to be replaced
 3. Increased District cost to purchase custom trucks when replacements are scheduled per NFPA recommendations.

Option No: 1 Provide 2nd floor access to meet State requirements.

Advantages:

- Meets the requirement of PESH and provides for ADA access to 2nd floor.

Disadvantages:

- Entrance to Facilities is in the back of the building
- Existing building has no improvement to insulation
- Increase in yearly maintenance cost due to elevator.
- Option does not include cost to make the kitchen meet code compliance.
- Option does not address any firematic safety improvements leaving the district open to additional PESH violations in the future.
- Access area will increase the heating load on the building increasing yearly costs.
- Option will require an increase in the electrical load from the existing undersized system.
- Exterior parking and approaches to the truck bays are not included
- Retaining wall on northeast side of building is not included.
- High anticipated contingency cost for construction work done on the 1948 building.
- This option will require District commitment to a bond issue for a number of years to cover the cost. Bond term will be shorter due to use for renovation will lead to higher annual bond cost and higher tax costs to the district.

Option No: 2 Provide 2nd floor access and additional firematic space.

Advantages:

- Code compliant truck bays for E171 & E172 with floor drains
- Option will include some paved parking area but not a complete resurfacing of the existing areas
- Second floor of the facility will become code and ADA compliant meeting PESH requirements.
- Facilities will gain the ability to fit trucks with commercial chassis thus saving the costs of designing with a custom chassis.
- This option will provide firematic office space and space that meets code requirements between trucks for the safety of the volunteers.

Disadvantages:

- A major part of the building infrastructure will remain the same with all the potentials of age related failures and high costs for repairs.
- The changes with this option will cause a much larger increase in the heating load on existing systems with little improvement in the insulation value to the existing structure.
- This option will only allow the district to finance the project on a 15 year basis causing the yearly payment higher which will be reflected and any tax increase.
- There are anticipate high contingency cost when renovating the existing 1948 building
- This option will cause a disruption in where we can house our trucks when construction takes place. We will need to find a place to house the trucks when construction is being done. This will be an added cost to the district.
- All of the disadvantages of option 1 would also apply here.

- Option No: 3 Provide a new single story code compliant facility

Advantages:

- Meets all code requirements and mitigates the DOL requirements for access to facilities.
- Provides for an energy efficient facility reducing district costs for heating and electrical costs.
- Low maintenance costs.
- Provides for new asphalt surfaces for parking and entrance to truck bays.
- Facility will meet the safety codes for the firefighters and the public.
- Every thing will be on the first floor.
- Facility will be a completely ADA compliant with our providing an elevator.
- Facility will provide the necessary separation of social and firematic services for the safety of all.
- Storage for required records, and needed workspace for conducting district business will be provided
- Facility will provide the needed space for the line officers and volunteers to efficiently complete the work required for training, state reports and record keeping.
- The facility will provide the handicap access needed for elections without having to remove trucks and equipment.
- The facility will be more readily accessible for use by the residents of the fire district.
- This option will allow the uninterrupted operation of the fire service as we will be able to stay in the present facility until the new facility is complete.
- New construction will allow up to 25 years financing thus lowering the yearly cost to the district.
- New construction will have the lowest contingency cost in construction.

Disadvantages

- The facility will require District commitment to a bond issue for a number of years to cover the cost.
- This option will require the district to demolish the existing facility