



ECFCA

Essex County Fire Chiefs Association

February 10, 2022

The Essex County Chiefs association members would like to take this opportunity to voice our concerns regarding the proposed consolidation of the South Orange and Maplewood Fire Departments. While not wanting to get involved in the local politics of South Orange and Maplewood and respecting their right to reduce the staffing that serves their residents, what is being proposed will have a direct negative effect on the surrounding communities and the greater Essex County area. The plan calls for reducing the amount of equipment available for mutual aid by 50% while at the same time calling on the rest of the County to provide more resources to cover a short-staffed department.

South Orange and Maplewood are two affluent communities that benefit significantly from the Midtown Direct Transit Line and are proliferating. Less affluent towns and cities, such as East Orange, Orange, and Irvington, should not be called upon to provide more resources in the form of apparatus, equipment, and personnel to augment two wealthier communities that choose to understaff their fire departments. At the same time reducing contiguous departments firefighting staffs, resulting in costs to those departments in the form of overtime for backfilling on-duty firefighters, equipment damage, and potential injury to firefighters.

Mutual aid, otherwise known as the Fire Service Resource Emergency Deployment Act, is an emergency plan developed and intended to be a backup system to help municipalities respond to emergencies that escalate beyond the expected level that local jurisdictions are staffed to handle. Mutual aid was not put in place so financially solvent towns could purposefully short-staff their Fire Departments, placing the onus on neighboring fire departments to constantly backfill and augment those departments at substantial costs.

A proposed joint meeting of the South Orange and Maplewood Fire Departments will negatively affect the mutual aid plan currently in place and create a myriad of issues for surrounding fire departments whose primary assignment is within their jurisdictional boundaries, rather than frequent responses into South Orange or Maplewood, to staff firehouses devoid of apparatus and firefighters.

In light of the issues cited and negative impacts on surrounding fire departments, the Essex County Fire Chief's Association respectfully requests that any action by the governing bodies of South Orange and Maplewood take into account the unintended results and impacts on mutual aid and the stress and costs placed on those towns who are expected to fill the void that will occur.

Sincerely,

Chief Robert Echavarria,
President