

**Town of Charlton
Saratoga County**

PUBLIC HEARING

Regarding the creation of an Ambulance District

August 27, 2018

The Public Hearing began at 6:30 p.m. at the Charlton Town Hall. Supervisor Grattidge stated that this is a Public Hearing regarding the creation of an Ambulance Taxing District in the Town of Charlton.

Present: Councilman Grasso, Councilwoman Heritage, Councilman Robbins, Supervisor Grattidge, Town Clerk Brenda Mills, Attorney Van Vranken

Excused: Councilman Ranaletto

Galway Ambulance representatives present: Beth Ruman, President
Brian Merchant, Board member
Mike Jazwinski, Captain

Ballston Lake Ambulance: John Boyd, Chairman

The Town Clerk read the following Legal Notice and confirmed that it was published in the official newspaper, The Daily Gazette on August 18, 2018:

**TOWN OF CHARLTON
TOWN BOARD**

LEGAL NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING

The Town Board has determined that it is in the best interest of the residents of the Town of Charlton to create an Ambulance Taxing District to ensure continued emergency services to the residents of the Town of Charlton. The Town Board has accepted a Map, Plan and Report for the Establishment of the Charlton Ambulance District in and for the Town of Charlton, which is available and on file in the Town Clerk's office.

A Public Hearing regarding the creation of an Ambulance District to be held on August 27, 2018 at 6:30 p.m. at the Town Hall, 758 Charlton Road, Charlton, New York, at which representatives from the Ambulance services will be available to answer questions and hear comments from residents.

Dated: August 13, 2018
Brenda Mills
Town Clerk

Supervisor Grattidge informed the audience that there were handouts available from each of the ambulance districts, including budget information. Maps were shown of the entire Town, which will be covered in the district.

Councilman Robbins said that the Town Board has spent a lot of time considering the funding issue including having Galway Ambulance come to speak at a Workshop, and the Board members have gone to the Ambulance Stations to meet and ask financial questions. He gave an overview of how this issue has risen and how the Board is approaching it:

- The ambulance companies have 3 main source of income: billing & insurance reimbursements, fundraising, and donations from the Towns they service.
- Charlton has about 75 calls to Galway EMS annually and provides 19% of the Municipal dollars they receive.
- In the past the Emergency Services have relied on volunteers. Currently most of the Galway EMS staffing is paid staff. About 50% of Ballston EMS is paid staff.
- NYS requires the EMS staff to be out the door within 5 minutes of the call, so this requires someone to be at the stations 24/7/365, and makes it hard to find volunteers.
- In June, Galway Ambulance made a presentation to the Town. The Board has since met with Ambulance representatives to review their financial situations.
- Using other services is not an option. The current EMS services hold the certificates to service their territories in Charlton. Creating a Charlton EMS is not sustainable. Galway EMS has 75 calls in Charlton on average annually.
- The Ambulance Districts submit their budget requests each year, and it has been funded by a line item in the Town budget. With the shift from volunteer to paid staffing, the requests have increased and this year, there is a need for \$85,400, which is very difficult to provide from the Town budget.

Councilman Robbins said that it would be easier to just pay for the ambulance services from the Town budget rather than creating an ambulance district. Creating the District creates anxiety, but in the long run, the Board feels like the Ambulance District would be the best option. The ambulance tax would appear as a line item on the County Tax will, and would be based on your assessed value, just as the fire district tax. This Board does not want to be the Board that establishes a new tax on your tax bill, but there are several reasons why we came to that conclusion. First, it allows you to see the value of what you have. It is .25 of assessed value, so an average house assessed at \$200,000 would see a tax of \$50 annually. It is a number that the Town Board is comfortable with. The Board also thinks that this is the best way to ensure that this service continues. He has spoken with people who are fine with paying \$50 or \$75 to make sure that we have ambulance services. He understands the anxiety created. It can be a slippery slope, however, this tax will ensure that there will always be ambulance services. There will be a Board of Commissioners established that will have oversight and will have involvement in the budget.

Councilman Robbins said that the Town Board feels that this is the best option for the residents, to ensure that there will be an ambulance service that is available and out the door within an average of 3 minutes from the time of the call.

Supervisor Grattidge asked the Town Clerk to read correspondence received from residents. An email dated August 18th from resident David Lis was read: The article in the local newspaper about a possible Town tax to offset cost to the Galway Ambulance service is uncalled for. If I have to live within my budget they should. I must live on a fixed income they should. Yes .18/1000 is not much to some people but add everything you pay it adds up. I have used their service in the pass and have no problem but they were paid by my insurance Co. and my co-pay. Therefore I'm against the tax.

There was no more written correspondence, so the Floor was opened to the public.

Jean Somers, resident, said that she is very pleased that Charlton is doing this for the ambulances. She thanked the ambulance staffers for their service. She asked if there could be a flat fee tax vs. based on assessed value. She would like to see the tax be a flat fee for everyone. Attorney Van Vranken said that he is not aware of anyone doing it that way in NYS, and thinks that it must be done by assessed value because of tax regulations.

Kathy Arnold, resident, asked how many paid staffers Galway EMS has, and how many hours will need to be made up by Mike retiring? It will cost more money to replace his hours with paid staffers. They said that their pay scale is below market rate. She believes that they are going to raise the pay and it is going to cost more. She feels that there is going to be more and more tax and then they may go defunct.

Brain Merchant, Galway Ambulance, said that Mike has volunteered for 48 years. He is paid for 40 hours and volunteers over 100 hours a week. They will need 3 people to replace him when he retires next year. They currently have 15 paid part-timers, 5 volunteers of which 2 are leaving at the end of 2018. The

volunteers give 72 to 100 hours per month. The current market average pay for a Paramedic is \$22 - \$24 per hour, Galway pays \$19. The current market average pay for an EMT is \$17 - \$18 per hour, Galway pays \$13.50.

John Boyd, Ballston Lake Ambulance, said that they have 730 12 hour shifts to staff. They went from 46% paid staffing to 52% currently. They don't hire people, they hire an agency to keep the cost down. John pointed out that staffers are required to take 24 hours of classes each year to keep their certification. Their average response time is 2.6 minutes from the time the calls comes in until the ambulance leaves the station. He said that the ambulance corps cannot survive on nothing. People must either give their time or their money.

Jay Wilkinson, resident, said that he feels that the ambulance services are vital. He feels that a taxing district is okay. He asked what will happen with the earmarked money. He wishes that the Board will allow the people to vote for the district.

Eric Utermark, resident, asked where the money is going to go. He does not want the tax and suggested that they cut their budgets and make due with what money they have.

Ed Ladu, resident, said that he can't say that he will oppose the district. He has used both ambulance services, with bills of \$1,854 and \$2,100. He does not feel that the tax is a lot of money. He would like assurance or protection or limits from an increasing tax. He has nothing against the ambulances, they are very nice people.

Rick Jackson, resident, agrees that the Town has an obligation to make sure that the ambulance services continue to be available for Charlton... inaudible...What prevents Mohawk Ambulance from coming in? Can the taxed district bill for services? Fire Departments cannot bill. He said that the ambulances have a certificate of need. If they do not meet the response time requirements, they lose their certificate of need. He is curious how a separate Board of Commissioners is going to work. Even though Mike is retiring, their costs are going down in 2019...inaudible.

Dave Wood, resident, said that he heard a lot of good comments tonight. He is not sure how we should finance it, but is glad that the Ag District is taken into consideration. It will be helpful to farmers and landowners. He appreciates what the ambulance staffers and firemen do. Hopefully there will be more information before the vote.

Ed Ladu, resident, said that he contacted Mohawk Ambulance and they said that without an invitation, they would not try to take over a Town.

Dawn Szurek, resident, asked if something were to happen to the current ambulance companies, and the Town were serviced by for-profit companies, would there still be the ambulance tax. She asked if Mohawk Ambulance could respond to a Charlton call.

Supervisor Grattidge said that a tax would continue because a for-profit company would have to be paid by contract. He has had a conversation with Empire Ambulance, and Charlton does not have enough call volume to warrant having a vehicle available to service our Town. The Supervisor feels that we are better off to stay with the current services that we have as it seems to be the most efficient solution.

John Boyd, Ballston Lake Ambulance said that Empire and Mohawk ambulances are not in the mutual aid system and Saratoga County dispatchers would not dispatch them to a Charlton call.

Mike Jawzinski, Galway Ambulance said that there is a mutual aid plan in place. If Galway gets a call and does not respond in 3 minutes, it is re-toned, and if they do respond in the first 5 minutes, a different ambulance is dispatched.

Jim Leupold, resident asked if the turn-around time is the same depending on the type of emergency. He used the ambulance service and it took 25 minutes to arrive. He also asked if the equalization rate effects the tax amount, how is the Town ration determined, how are adjustments made in the future, would like a line item to be the same for everyone. He feels if an insurance agency reimburses an individual, there needs to be a better collection system.

John Boyd said that is the dispatcher that makes the determination if lights and sirens are needed, and if real urgency is needed, which can make a difference on the arrival time.

Supervisor Grattidge said that the 3rd party billing that the corps use is one of the areas that they receive income from. The Board has heard that sometimes patients are reimbursed and the money is not forwarded to the ambulance corps, and it is not followed up on. That is something that the Board has told the ambulance corps that they must address. The Town money supplements what they receive from insurance companies.

Joyce Jackson from the Ballston Ambulance said that they use a service called MultiMed for their billing and collection.

Rick Jackson said that emergency services don't make money for ambulance service... inaudible.

RESOLUTION #144

Motion to close the public session of the Hearing

Motion by Councilman Grasso

Seconded by Councilwoman Heritage

The public session of the Hearing was closed at 7:49 p.m.

Vote: All Ayes, No Nays. **CARRIED.**

TOWN BOARD COMMENTS

Councilman Grasso said that he appreciates the people coming out tonight. He wanted a good debate and good questions and he feels that happened tonight. This is a matter that the Board has thought a lot about. He addressed some of the questions asked tonight.

Regarding the budget earmarked ambulance money:

He said that people have asked what happens to the earmarked town budget money for the ambulances. He explained that in the past few years the Board has made drastic budget cuts to other budget line items in order to fund the ambulances, and those items and services need to be restored (roads, salaries, equipment, etc.) The money would be used for things that the Board also feels are critical for the Town, maybe not as critical as ambulance service, but also essential. His concern as a Town Board member is that it is not sustainable to continue to peel more and more money for ambulance service from other budget lines, as we are taking money from services that we provide our residents. We have reached a critical point, and that is why we are having to make these tough decisions.

The assurance about future service:

He said that what they are trying to do is solidify what the future service is. The way that the Town is served right now is a great way and is very efficient. Can he predict that the way that we are going to do it through this tax rate is going to be the same 10 years or 20 years from now? He does not know. He cannot predict it. The decisions that we are trying to make today are the best for where we are today and the near future. The concerns he has about EMS are the same concerns he has for how fire service is provided.

The role of the Ambulance commissioners:

From what he has learned, the commissioners are in an Advisory role to the Town Board. They will work with the ambulance districts on reviewing their budgets and understanding what Charlton's fair share is, and making their recommendations to the Town Board. The Town Board will determine the tax rate based on those recommendations. They are not elected commissioners, so they are different from the Fire District Commissioners, as they are appointed by the Town Board and they are working at the Town Board's request.

Does the tax law still apply for for-profit ambulance services?

He believes that it does, based on his research. It is something that they can delve into more. That question may be more relevant if in future years we have to change from our current situation.

Regarding the equalization rate:

Supervisor Grattidge said that the equalization rate does not pertain because it is a Town contained tax and not compared to other Towns. The tax will be based on assessed value, not full market value.

Supervisor Grattidge said that Board always looks at their call volume based on a 2 ½ year period and what percentage of the calls are to Charlton. That is how the Board determines how much money the Town gives them. The call volume has stayed pretty consistent.

The Supervisor said that the Town Board would review this every year. The ambulances bring a request to the Town Board and the Town Board would review it with the commissioners and determine what the final number would be. The budget process would still be the same with workshops and public hearings. The Board would do annual visits to their facilities and make sure that their facilities are in good working order, and then which allocation would be given.

Councilman Grasso said that there was a question about the referendum process. Because this is a Town instituted tax, we are subject to a permissive referendum process, which gives the public the opportunity to petition the Board and force a public referendum. If 5% of the voters sign a petition saying that they think that this issue should go to vote, then we will. The Board is prepared for that. He feels that it is an equitable tax especially compared to the fire tax that we pay. Right now, residents in the Charlton Fire District pay \$1.30 per thousand of assessed value, West Charlton pays \$2.00, and Harmony Corners is \$1.38. What we are looking at for EMS is \$.25 per thousand and personally he feels that that is fair and equitable. Personally he said that he would pay a lot more for EMS, just understanding what we have to pay to have a fire truck show up, which is also important.

Councilman Grasso said that when the Board looks at the increase in the EMS provider's budgets every year, he understands why they have gone up. He said that he appreciates the ambulances opening up their books every year for the Board to look at. From 2017 to 2018 the budget requests from Ballston Lake and Galway EMS went up 50.8%. The amount the Town Board had agreed to fund was an increase of 32%. For the 2019 budget, they are looking at a 20% increase. Again, it is another substantial increase that we are facing. When we are looking at Town revenue increases through Sales Tax of 3 or 4% per year, it is not keeping up with the cost of ambulance service. He cannot say that the rate of \$.25 per thousand is going to stay that way forever, but this process gives us the ability to look at this tax rate every year, put more optics on the ambulance service and make sure that we are providing the best value for our residents. That is something good about the process that we are going down.

Supervisor Grattidge said that quite a few other Towns have an ambulance district tax. Clifton Park has an ambulance tax of \$.25, the northern Town of Ballston is \$.52, and the southern Town of Ballston is \$.11, the Town of Milton is \$.42, per thousand of assessed value. So Charlton would be right in the lower range of what the other Towns have done. If this district tax does not go through, and this stays a line item in the budget and we have to raise money through a general tax, it would stay the same way, a tax on the assessed value. The Town has had over a 50 year history with both Ballston Lake and Galway ambulances and he cannot emphasize enough how dedicated both agencies have been. They have spent a lot of time going over this with us. Both of the Supervisors of Galway and Providence have supported the idea of funding the EMS through a tax.

Supervisor Grattidge said that he doesn't know if anyone really appreciates the amount of training and effort goes into being an EMT or Paramedic and what they deliver when they come out to your home. You are getting the kind of medical care, in that first miracle hour, that can save your life. Having to have that kind of trained personnel on call and available 24/7 is just something that we see as an essential service to continue. He believes that the Town Board will be rigorous in the review in working with the Ambulance Companies to make sure that we get the services that we are contracting for. If there are ways to consolidate or improve efficiencies, we would certainly support that going forward.

Councilwoman Heritage thanked the residents for coming out to voice their questions and concerns. She reiterated that the Town does have a finite amount of income that comes from sales and mortgage tax, so it is not an endless amount of money that we are working with. She feels that we are at a critical point, as Councilman Grasso said. It is not a new idea, the Fire Departments were originally funded from the Town budgets and then evolved into the system that we have now. Other Towns are doing similar things with the ambulance services as well. When we are talking about all of our emergency services, it is not a perfect system, but we definitely need them. It is just about deciding about the best vehicle to go about being able to sustain the services for the future.

Councilman Robbins thanked the residents for participating tonight. He addressed a question about possible increases in the tax. He said it seems like the greatest variable right now seems to be the personnel. There is 50% volunteerism now, and it is only going to get so high and then it should level off.

The Hearing adjourned at 8:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Brenda Mills
Town Clerk