

POSTOPINION

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The Hidden Cost of FDNY Cuts

THE evening of Sunday May 23, while most New Yorkers were eating dinner, watching TV or walking the dog, 250 of our city's Bravest were risking their lives in Rego Park, rescuing the Ohr Natan Synagogue and a nearby animal clinic from a raging four-alarm fire.

The firefighters saved a community house of worship and many animals — and also prevented hundreds of thousands of dollars in damages to the buildings. That's one example of the hidden value that makes the Fire Department one of the best investments New York City can make.

As negotiations proceed on next year's spending, New Yorkers deserve to know that the city's budget will keep them safe — which means keeping open the 20 fire companies now on the chopping block.

The value provided by the FDNY far exceeds its cost to the city. Always the first to respond to fires or medical emergencies, building collapses, gas leaks or terrorist attacks, our fire companies save homes, businesses and lives.

Last year, Columbia University collaborated with the FDNY on a study to produce a conservative estimate of how much the department saves homeowners, businesses and residents each year. The low-

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end finding for how much property New York's Bravest saved lasted year was \$3.1 billion.

And the study only focused on structural damage — leaving out the economic impact of lost possessions, the costs of relocating burned-out businesses and even the impact of deaths on families. It also assumed property costs of only \$100 per square foot — a mere fraction of real values across the city.

To prevent that \$3.1 billion in damage, the city spent just \$1.5 billion on the department's operating budget. In other words, New Yorkers get a 2-to-1 return on their investment in the FDNY.

That the \$3.1 billion breaks down to about \$15.6 million in property saved for each of the city's 198 engine companies. Closing 20 companies may not mean an added \$313 million in damage — but it won't mean zero, either.

Then there's the losses you can't put a dollar figure on: In the first quarter of this year, the FDNY rescued 12,092 New Yorkers. Closing 20 companies will raise response times — putting both the firefighters who risk their lives for our safety and the lives of New Yorkers on the line.

The FDNY is now the only city service trained to respond to time-critical medical

emergencies — and a cardiac-arrest victim has just five minutes before suffering irreversible brain damage or death.

Finally, our city remains the world's top terrorist target. That's why the federal and city governments have invested hundreds of millions since 9/11 in equipping, preparing and formulating new FDNY units to respond to future attacks.

The NYPD certainly deserved credit for its swift action during the May 1 Times Square bomb scare, but the FDNY also earned our thanks for being first on the scene and realizing that the smoke emitting from the car in fact indicated a bomb.

Today's reality demands that we be prepared to respond to the worst. Yet we're headed toward closing fire companies — compromising our safety and our security.

Whether it's saving a synagogue in Rego Park or meeting a terror attack in Times Square, the FDNY is always the first to respond. With a 2-to-1 return on the public's investment, it's the best deal in city government.

We owe it to our seniors, our children and our future to keep our city safe and to let Mayor Bloomberg know that emergencies don't care about budgets.

City Councilwoman Elizabeth Crowley represents parts of Queens.