

For our first responders and our community, we have work to do

Saranac Lake is about to make its biggest investment in history, but we should stop the current freight train approach and start planning for that investment the right way. Our first responders have long deserved modern facilities that meet their current and future needs. We owe it to both them and the taxpayers to ensure this project is thoroughly planned and fiscally responsible. We have a lot of work ahead to make it right.

Here are key points and proposed steps that must be addressed for what could be a **\$30 million, 70,000-square-foot project**.

1. Let's start by acknowledging the importance of everyone understanding exactly what we need to do before diving into design for this project. We need to have a planning process that welcomes public input and leads to a broadly accepted conclusion that a consolidated emergency service complex is our best option or whether a combination of new and/or reused/remodeled facilities are needed to accommodate our emergency services. Our planning work needs to be fact-based. It needs to incorporate thorough engineering, environmental and traffic impact studies. These studies are not just to be done in order to check boxes on a to-do list. They are essential to ensure that the proposed development site and/or reuse locations will meet our community's needs without substantial, adverse impacts to our neighborhoods. The data and analyses that we need to gather will guide our design process and assist us in complying with all regulatory requirements.

2. Fiscal responsibility must be a cornerstone of this project. How much will this project cost and how will it be paid for? What will be the long-term operation and maintenance costs? We should not have settled on the single alternative of a consolidated facility at 33 Petrova without considering these questions. While our capital reserve fund is earmarked for this purpose, transparency and prudence must guide every financial decision. An independent financial review of the proposed expenditures and potential cost overruns is imperative. This review will provide a clear picture of the financial landscape and help us avoid pitfalls that could derail our progress.

3. Access to state Route 3 remains a contentious issue. For this project to succeed, we need a detailed plan based on written guidance from the state Department of Transportation, which outlines how emergency vehicles can use a dedicated service road to provide direct access to state Route 3 without using residential streets. We need a clear indication that necessary wetland permits can be secured to meet needs. This is not just a matter of operational efficiency, it is about maintaining community support and ensuring the safety of our residents and school children.

4. While initial inspections of the proposed site have been conducted, we must go further. A third-party structural inspection by a certified independent engineer is essential. This unbiased assessment will provide a clear understanding of the building's condition and any potential remediation costs, ensuring we are making informed decisions.

5. One feasibility study concluded that the 100 Broadway site was not suitable for a combined emergency services complex. However, I believe we can explore alternative solutions. Imagine a new, modern, beautiful fire station at 33 Petrova Ave., with adjacent housing that offers significant benefits to our first responders. Law enforcement officers, firefighters, emergency medical technicians and drivers could become homeowners with substantial incentives — including reductions in purchase price and property tax abatements if they were willing to commit to living on the property for five years as their principal residence. Or, substantial reductions in rental costs if an apartment or townhouse project were to be built on the site. This could be a significant way to build community and induce younger residents to join our volunteer and paid emergency services. This approach isn't just about housing; it's about creating a community where our first responders feel valued and supported.

6. For the police department, I propose moving to 100 Broadway, the current fire station. This adaptive reuse of a beloved historic building would keep the police department in the heart of downtown, ensuring accessibility and continuity.

I ask my fellow board members to work together to get this job done the right way. We must seek solutions that are legitimate and respectful of our community's values. We must listen to our residents, conduct thorough due diligence, and act responsibly.

Saranac Lakers deserve nothing less.