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Consolidation of Fire Districts

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For Reference

Not to be taken from this room

THE CONTRA COSTA COUNTY CONSOLIDATED FIRE DISTRICT lies in a rapidly growing area of California approximately 30 miles east of San Francisco. It encompasses 155 square miles of land and includes six cities ranging from 2,000 to 100,000 population. The total population is 300,000. Twenty years ago the population was approximately 50,000. Growth has brought large shopping centers, apartment complexes, and industrial areas. But grass and inaccessible brushlands are still part of the fire protection problem.

The Department consists of 18 stations with 240 paid employees and 70 reserve firemen. The staff consists of four assistant chiefs, seven battalion chiefs, 12 Fire Prevention Bureau members, a training officer, a master mechanic, five fire alarm operators, and six clerks.

The District, which resulted from the consolidation of six fire departments, is considered a success by citizens, governmental administrators, and employees. We do not, however, advocate blanket adoption of consolidation of fire departments. Consolidation does not offer a panacea for all the problems of budget and level of service. Local factors such as geography, tax base, assessed valuation, growth, and existing service must be considered. The benefits of consolidation experienced by the Contra Costa County Consolidated Fire District are given for your consideration. We advocate only that consolidation could help some fire departments, and that it be studied objectively by those interested.

head by the incorporation of the City of Pleasant Hill. The city lay astraddle the Mt. Diablo Fire District and the Central Fire District. It had to decide which district to join. Its decision to join the Central Fire District brought about the first real interest in consolidation by city managers and the beginning of a movement for action. The first active consolidation took place in December 1964, with the merger of the Central County Fire District and the Mt. Diablo Fire District, both 1961 Act¹ fire protection districts governed by the county Board of Supervisors. Each was fully paid and had five stations.

In 1966 the Mountain View Fire District, a one-station, part-paid-part-volunteer department, was annexed by action of the Board of Supervisors. In July 1968 the City of Martinez, with a two-station, part-paid-part-volunteer department, annexed to the District by vote of the people.

The next annexation came about as a result of a city incorporation. When the City of Lafayette was incorporated it blanketed the Lafayette Fire District, an autonomous fire district. The City Council initiated and promoted annexation of the Lafayette Fire District on January 1, 1969.

At the same time the Board of Supervisors merged the Bay Point Fire District. That annexation was the result of the Navy's purchase of a safety buffer zone around its ammunition base, an action that obliterated the town of Port Chicago and cut all but a few square miles from the original district.

THE BENEFITS GAINED BY CONSOLIDATION

Financial Benefits

Tax reduction. Immediately after the initial consolidation a tax reduction pattern developed. Growth contributed to the reduction, but a capital improvement program that consisted of an average of 10 per cent of the budget was in effect at the time. In other words, the

CONSOLIDATION in Contra Costa County was first studied and tabled in 1935 by the County Fire Chiefs' Association. In 1958 another study was proposed and made by the County Administrator's Office. That study was also rejected, primarily because the involved parties failed to take an objective viewpoint. Fire chiefs, politicians, and unions all took the selfish approach, with resulting lack of action. However, the need for future studies was well established.

Later that same year the problem was brought to a

¹An address delivered by the author to the Seventy-fourth NFPA Annual Meeting, held May 18-22, 1970, in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

¹The Fire Reorganization Act of the County Fire Protection Districts, adopted by California in 1961, is commonly referred to as Fire and Fire Protection, Division 12, Health and Safety Code.

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growth was cream skimmed off the top to finance a very ambitious capital improvement program. The tax rates were as follows: 1964-65, \$.872; 1965-66, \$.82; 1966-67, \$.799; 1967-68, \$.75; 1968-69, \$.73; and 1969-70, \$.725.

Insurance rate reduction. The two districts initially consolidated enjoyed Class 3 dwelling rates in Fire Zones 1, 2, and 3. Later-annexing departments had a best rate of either Class 4 or Class 6. Upon annexation, all immediately received a blanket reduction to Consolidated's Class 3. When multiplied by the total number of residences in the District, the savings amounted to thousands of dollars to the citizens.

Elimination of duplicated services. Five of the original districts had had their own fire alarm, maintenance, training, and clerical services, which were combined into a single service with ensuing savings. Relocating stations saved station-building and manning.

Elimination of duplicated personnel. There were five fire alarm operators on duty when the departments were operating independently. Since consolidation there have been only two fire alarm operators on duty — and with an improvement in quality. Tables of Organization called for a total of 16 chief officers in the separate departments. Under consolidation only 12 are carried. Three fire marshals were eliminated.

Elimination of duplicated equipment. Each independent department carried several reserve pumpers and specialized apparatus, at considerable overhead cost. Only four reserve pumpers are required for the Consolidated District, and fewer four-wheel-drive apparatus. Disposal of troublesome older apparatus has lowered maintenance costs. Had the departments stayed independent it would have been necessary to buy two new aerial trucks. Proximity of neighboring trucks made those purchases unnecessary.

Purchasing. Quantity purchasing has drawn spirited competitive bidding, with resulting savings.

Improved Services

Response strength. Because of the larger sources to draw from, first-alarm response has been increased by 30 per cent. Ladder truck service has been extended to all parts of the District, many of which had no truck response at all unless called for by mutual aid. The backup strength on additional alarms is now programmed to a degree that was impossible under independent operation.

Large-fire operations. Much can be said about mutual aid. But success lies in developing standard operating procedures and terminology and knowledge of apparatus capabilities, and in *holding training sessions*. How many of us do it? Not very many. Large-district operations forced standard operating procedures and multi-company training. The result was improved large-fire

operations.

Elimination of boundary lines. Artificial and impractical political boundaries necessitated six- and seven-minute runs that could have been made in two minutes by another department. Now all first-alarm response comes from the three nearest stations.

Training. The efforts at training had ranged from none to as much as part-time training officers could develop with no facilities. Recruits were put on the back of an engine and told to hang on tight and keep out of the way. With the appointment of a full-time training officer it was possible to institute a fully developed training program built around the American Insurance Association's Special Interest Bulletin No. 234, *Fire Department Training*. Personnel showed immediate improvement and soon dominated all county civil service examinations.

Apparatus. Many of the pumpers in the original districts complied only with the pump tests in NFPA No. 19, *Standard for Automotive Fire Apparatus*, did not carry adequate equipment, and were totally inflexible. Forced standardization has meant that all pumpers have been brought up to NFPA No. 19 standards and equipped with booster pumps to make them versatile units capable of fighting structural or wildland fires. In addition, specialized apparatus such as tankers, aerials, and wildland units are immediately dispatched into many areas that previously did not receive that coverage.

Staff specialization. One of the greatest benefits of consolidation is staff specialization. When a man specializes on one job he displays greater productivity, makes fewer errors, and is able to contribute more to development in his field. The expertise of specialists is evident in the implementation and refinement of programs and in participation in activities such as NFPA Committee work, codes development, and giving instruction in outside fire service schools and consultation to other departments. In this vein the fire service should be no less concerned than business in quality and quantity of production.

Before consolidation the only full-time specialists were fire prevention inspectors. All other staff functions were handled by line personnel on a part-time basis. After consolidation it was possible to assign full-time personnel to plans check, arson investigation, permits, weed abatement, public relations and records, training, and the functions of master mechanic. Continuous exposure to their specialty gave men opportunity to develop high skills.

Greater Resources

Communications. Before consolidation none of the departments had communications facilities that con-

formed to NFPA No. 73, *Standard for the Installation, Maintenance, and Use of Municipal Fire Alarm Systems*. The savings on fire alarm personnel enabled the District to build a Fire Alarm Center that complies with NFPA No. 73 and with Civil Defense specifications for an emergency operating center. Installation of two remote radio sites improved coverage in mountainous terrain. A radio-type alarm system provides area coverage that would otherwise be prohibitive because of wire installation and undergrounding costs.

Training facilities. Before consolidation there were no designed training facilities. They were simply too costly for the independent departments. Since the advent of a single budget, a broader tax base, and a capital improvement program, a million-dollar fire college has been half completed. The fire college is to be a total facility, including classrooms, tower, drafting pit, fire building, driver-training area, control tower, storage warehouse, and special problems area. It will provide means to train personnel that would never have been possible under independent operation.

Training aids. Instructors now have a full range of training aids, including all types of visual aids, video tape, fireground simulators, mannequins, and mockups, besides station libraries and a reference library. A stimulus to instructors, the training aids have resulted in more efficient training.

Clerical staff. Some may question inclusion of the clerical staff as a resource. However, these people have proved to be vital in organization mechanics. Their superior record-keeping, auditing, and production of printed materials have enabled us to produce our communications and training materials in a quality manner. Firemen have been relieved of part-time clerical duties and put where they belong — in active fire protection.

Repair facilities. Before consolidation each small department maintained minimum tools and equipment for repairing apparatus. Consolidation has meant a larger, more complete repair shop. The shop has specialized tools and is supported by a lube truck and a tow truck. Apparatus is quickly repaired and returned to service.

Special equipment. No special equipment is bought unless sufficient use will be gained from it. Unit cost usually goes up as the size of the department goes down. Use frequency validated the purchase of special equipment for a photo lab, a fire alarm repair platform truck, a chlorine patch kit, engineering equipment, a commercial sewing machine, and woodworking equipment.

Hose tower. Consolidation made money available to

design and build a hose-drying tower that operates at maximum efficiency and with minimum labor. The centrally located tower will handle 6,000 feet of 2½-inch hose per day, summer or winter. The results are quicker return of hose to service and a smaller hose inventory.

Other Benefits

Stronger programs. In brief, the programs (activities) that have been strengthened by consolidation are training, public education, company inspection, reserve firemen, and hydrant maintenance. Before consolidation some departments were active in a few programs, none consistently. Standardization requirements forced development or institution of programs. As a result, high-quality programs were uniformly implemented throughout the 18 stations.

Upgrading of recruits. Applicant quality varied with the competition for the job, and competition depended primarily upon working conditions. Some departments had very few applicants, with a consequent lowering of quality. After consolidation and the raising of working conditions the applicants numbered in the hundreds. The result was better-qualified recruits.

Promotional selectivity. The same principle holds here as for the upgrading of recruits. The more men competing, the better the uniform quality.

Capital improvements. Capital improvement programs usually vary in direct ratio to growth. Tight budgets had forced some departments to put aside badly needed new apparatus and training facilities and fire alarm center improvements. With broader budgeting and a pooling of capital budgets, projects previously considered unobtainable could become reality.

Retention of personnel. Turnover of personnel for job-related reasons indicated dissatisfaction with working conditions, opportunity, and activity. Consolidation raised smaller and poorer-paying departments to an improved standard. Promotional opportunities were negligible in stagnant departments; they are plentiful in the larger consolidated district. There are also opportunities for specialization, which serve to hold the interest of personnel and reduce turnover.

Forced analysis and revised perspective. Although indirect, this is one of the greatest benefits of consolidation. Merging different philosophies, apparatus designs, traditions, and fire problems is not always successful. Consequently, to resolve problems it is necessary to re-examine systems in the light of the results they produce. The analysis invariably brings about improvements in operations and equipment. △