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Notes on a successful merger

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SF-Consolidation (Regu.)

Almost two years ago, two fire departments serving three small California towns merged into one overall fire authority. The result has been better service, reduced costs, and lower ISO ratings.

By Tracy Salcedo
Staff Assistant/Public Information
Officer
Ross Valley Fire Department
San Anselmo, California

The communities of San Anselmo, Fairfax, and Sleepy Hollow nestle in the grassy hills of the upper Ross Valley in Marin County, just north of San Francisco. Until July 1982, two separate departments provided fire and life safety services to the residential population of 19,444 (the 1980 census figure for San Anselmo and for Fairfax). On July 1, 1982, these two departments merged to become the Ross Valley Fire Authority.

The old San Anselmo Fire Department protected the town of San Anselmo and contracted service to the Sleepy Hollow Fire Protection District, an unincorporated community bordering San Anselmo. The department consisted of two chief officers, a staff assistant, 18 paid firefighters, and 18 volunteers working out of two stations. The response area covered 4.5 square miles and consisted of commercial and residential property as well as wildland.

The Fairfax Fire Department was responsible for 2.5 square miles of similar terrain immediately to the west of San Anselmo. It operated a single fire station with a total of six paid firefighters, 15 volunteers, a fire marshal, and a fire chief.

Since the incorporation of both towns in the early 1900s, fire service has been provided in this manner. Beginning in January 1981, at the request of the Fairfax-San Anselmo Council-Administrative Committee, which consists of one council member from each town plus the two town administrators, the fire chiefs

of San Anselmo and Fairfax began to review ways to cooperatively provide fire protection to the two towns.

Although the formal request to evaluate alternative concepts of fire service delivery eventually came from administration, the members of the two fire departments had been considering merger before that. During the latter part of 1980, in response to the stated desires of fire department personnel, Fairfax Chief George Hettama, San Anselmo Chief Bob Beedle, and San Anselmo's Assistant Chief Rick Mollenkopf began expanding the limited automatic response procedures of the two fire departments.

As a way of compiling the data requested by the council-administrative committee, the chiefs initiated a formal joint response to all reported fires (structural and grass) in either jurisdiction with additional coverage provided, upon request, by off-duty paid personnel, the combined volunteer forces of both departments, and mutual aid. The chiefs began to conduct joint training sessions (including familiarization drills) and joint staff/personnel meetings. During these meetings, they discussed and evaluated policies, procedures, methods, and concerns in implementing a cooperative fire protection effort.

Based on the results of this experiment in joint response and training, both the fire administrators and the firefighters concluded that merger of the two departments would be the most productive and acceptable means of providing fire service.

One of the major reasons the merger of the two departments has been so successful is because the personnel of both departments wanted to combine forces. Without this agreement from within, the merger never would have worked. As it is, the firefighters—paid and volunteer—do not consider themselves merely colleagues; their working conditions and the proximity of the jurisdictions have inspired a real camaraderie. They have become friends, both on and off duty. While the chiefs were exploring other avenues of providing comprehensive fire protection, as requested by the council-administrative committee, the fire-

fighters wanted merger and were prepared to work toward that end.

The town councils next requested a six-month trial period of increased automatic response and more extensive joint training on a formal basis. This was begun in February 1981. In the meantime, the chiefs were to explore other alternatives for increased protection, including:

- The integration of the two departments into one cohesive unit
- Full automatic aid/joint response by two separate departments (both departments would initially respond to all reported fires)
- Modified or limited automatic aid (joint response restricted to selected buildings and wildland situations that presented a significant fire potential)
- Mutual aid only (response provided only on request of the jurisdiction in which the incident occurred)

During the trial period begun in February 1981, it became even more apparent to members of the two fire departments that the first alternative was the most economically and functionally feasible. It was also recognized that a complete justification would have to be provided to the respective town councils to back up this belief that full merger was the best way to go.

To substantiate their convictions, the two chiefs prepared documents and made presentations elaborating on the practical advantages of merger. They cited the impending retirement of Fairfax Chief George Hettama, which meant that duplicative administrative functions would be eliminated through attrition, with a commensurate savings in salary. Management responsibilities could be adequately handled by Beedle and Mollenkopf.

They also cited the increased level of service to both towns. For a comparable cost, engine response to a fire in San Anselmo would increase from two to three apparatus, and in Fairfax, from one to three. They pointed out that a larger department would realize savings because it could purchase in quantity, thereby achieving economy of scale.

For the chiefs, this economy of scale, reduction in administrative staff, and increased protection, coupled with a guarantee from the Insurance Services Office that the insurance rating for San Anselmo would be reduced from 4 to 3 and for Fairfax, from 5 to 3 (with commensurate savings to business and property owners), was sufficient justification for the respective town councils.

Fire Chief

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How could they possibly turn down a recommendation that would provide better service for the same or less cost?

Surprisingly—or maybe not—there was opposition to the plan. A couple of members of the Fairfax Town Council felt that the individuality of their town would be lost by assimilation into the larger community of San Anselmo. They did not want to lose autonomy or sovereignty for either Fairfax or San Anselmo. Fairfax Mayor Frank Egger spearheaded an antimerger campaign that attacked every aspect of the proposal, from the “alleged” monetary savings to the loss of the Fairfax fire chief position, which they said would be detrimental not only to the fire service but to the “total town operation.”

The fire chiefs were prepared to rebut these charges. Their documentation clearly showed that what the citizens of both communities wanted was improvement in the fire service, whether there were concomitant fiscal savings or not.

In the end, the citizens of Fairfax, after hearing the chiefs discuss the positive aspects and Mayor Egger the negative ramifications of merger, decided they wanted three-engine responses, reduced costs, and the lower ISO rating. Support for the merger at numerous public hearings was enthusiastic. The small group of dissenters was rebuffed, and council approval was granted. There never was any opposition in San Anselmo, whose town council readily granted approval.

A fire board consisting of two members from the San Anselmo Town Council, two members from the Fairfax Town Council, and one member from the Sleepy Hollow Fire Protection District was established to oversee the operations of the new Ross Valley Authority.

A few problems and disagreements surfaced within and between departments, such as what color the new fire apparatus should be painted, and what color uniforms firefighters should wear on duty. But the personnel exhibited diplomacy and good taste in deciding the outcome of such minor skirmishes, which never threatened the impending merger.

So on July 1, 1982, without fanfare but for a comment from the staff assistant that she would have to start using the new letterheads, the Ross Valley Fire Authority went into service. The department looks forward to many years of service as an innovative fire department in Marin County and in the state of California. ■

Fire Chief
APRIL/1984

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