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# INTERVIEW:

SI - Consolidation (Regional)

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## Consolidation of the Anchorage (Alaska) Fire Department

### For Reference

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by  
Assistant Chief Warren E. Isman  
Montgomery County (Maryland)  
Fire and Rescue Services

*As municipalities face greater and greater financial pressures, consolidation of town, city, and county governments becomes increasingly attractive. I recently had the opportunity of spending some time with the Anchorage, Alaska Fire Department. Chief Eugene Bennett has just completed guiding his department through a consolidation of the Anchorage City and Anchorage Borough (county) Fire Departments. Our discussion on consolidation follows in the hopes that it will assist those chiefs whose departments are considering this step.*



Assistant Chief Warren E. Isman is the Chief of the Division of Operations Services for the Montgomery County, (Maryland) Department of Fire and Rescue Services.

Chief Isman received a Bachelor of Science degree in Physics from City College of New York and is currently preparing his thesis for his Master of Arts degree from the University of Maryland. He has authored many articles for the leading fire service journals and will shortly have a textbook entitled, "Fire fighting Pumps and Hydraulics," published.

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Isman: When did the consolidation actually take place between the city and the borough?  
Bennett: Well the political consolidation took place after an election. I believe it was September 8, 1975, but the consolidation of the Fire Departments didn't really get rolling until the appointment of Fire Chief (myself) to head up the municipal force, in the first part of November. The Fire Departments, I might point out, were allowed to continue status quo, simply because the Mayor felt that the fire departments were delivering the essential service and didn't need his immediate attention.  
Isman: How long was consolidation in the planning stage? You just didn't up and say combine. Some great deal of planning had to go on.  
Bennett: No--as a matter of fact, there was no planning. This was the problem I found myself facing. I had been personally trying, for the previous two years, to get the planning department involved doing some planning, because I could foresee the unification coming. There was simply the appointment of the municipal fire chief, with the implication, "Here's the ball, you've got it."  
Isman: What was the size of each Fire Department before consolidation?  
Bennett: The former city fire department had 108 personnel. The former borough was something on the order of

130, but that included over 20 paramedics. So, you could say that they had just really become identical in size. That is, the former borough department was growing, and the city department was static, and they had just become nearly equal in size.  
Isman: Were there any volunteer departments before consolidation took place within either group?  
Bennett: When you say either group, you are not alluding to the total picture. The Municipality of Anchorage, if you drive it by road, is approximately 100 miles long. What is now known as Anchorage, includes the Anchorage Borough and Anchorage City, Chugiak, Eagle River and Girdwood, which formerly were separate towns. In fact Girdwood, was an incorporated municipality, while Chugiak and Eagle River were service districts.  
That portion of the former borough fire department which served the central area of Anchorage was a combination of 4 service districts that were combined into one large service district and then that had become known as the Borough Fire Department. So what I'm saying here is that we had the former city fire department and the former borough fire department, which had all career personnel. Additionally, there were the Chugiak and Girdwood Departments with volunteer personnel.

Isman: What will happen to the volunteer fire departments?

Bennett: Girdwood and Chugiak are viable volunteer fire departments. They're delivering the level of protection that's needed for the community. The volunteer service is perfectly adequate for their needs and they have done a good job. We are now in the process of building a third fire station in Chugiak so these fire stations are spread around the district adequately. On this basis, you have a fast response to any one of the three communities so the volunteers can pick up apparatus and quickly respond to the fire.

Isman: Are there any controls over the volunteer system?

Bennett: There are the controls built in through assembly approval of the budgets and so forth. We haven't gone through this procedure yet. The way it should work is that the assembly will look to the municipal chief to comment on budget requests.

Isman: You mentioned a rather large area now that you've consolidated. What is the actual size of the area covered by the Anchorage Fire Department?

Bennett: The municipality itself is approximately the size of Vermont, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island combined with some left over. As I recall, the figure is somewhere around 3,400 square miles. But then you subtract away a good percentage of that acreage which happens to be the mountain area, the Chugach Range which is behind the city and now has become a State Park. In addition, if we remove the two military bases, Elmendorf Air Force Base and Fort Richardson, Fire Island which is controlled by FAA, the four Nike sites and some designated Indian Lands in the lands claims settlement, it gets the area down to approximately 800 square miles that the municipal fire chief is responsible for.

Isman: Who is responsible for forest fires?

Bennett: In effect, what we have worked out with the state fire authorities and the United States Bureau of Land Management, which formerly provided forestry protection, was that we are responsible for wild land fire throughout the municipality. But of course they have responsibilities in certain tracts that they still govern. We will make an initial attack on any wild land fire, but if it is not controlled in 60 minutes then we can bring in their back-up fire fighting teams, including their attack bombers.

Isman: Were their any costs involved solely with the consolidation. In other words, did you experience any additional costs because of the consolidation?

Bennett: As far as overhead items are concerned, we saved something on the

order of \$140,000 a year. There were incidental costs.

For example, suddenly it was necessary to adopt the emblem of the new municipality, new patches, new vehicle identification, and a standardization of color format of vehicles. About one-fourth of our 56-vehicle fleet need cosmetic changes. Changes to the fire apparatus costs us somewhere between \$2,000 and \$2,400 per vehicle. However, we have not begun wholesale painting, but will handle the change during the regularly scheduled maintenance that we would have occurred before as individual departments. But the major cost was in bringing the lesser paid former borough fire fighters up to the same pay level as the former city fire fighters. In some cases, the impact was great. I can recall one medic position in particular that saw a 49.9% wage increase. Now this translated into something around \$600,000 in salary adjustments. But you have to recognize too, that the former borough had been stalling off settlement with the fire fighter's union, because they could see the transition coming. Why should they face the heat of increasing taxes to pay for the fire fighter salaries when they could let the new municipal government face the citizens.

Isman: In making the combination now, fringe benefits between the two departments changed. How did you handle, for example, insurance and sick leave?

Bennett: We handled it with great anguish. Because we had two totally different governments, with two different philosophies of government. We have the involvement of the State especially into the former borough because the borough really was kind of an octopus arm of the state government. So we had, all of a sudden, at the time of unification, two different medical plans, two different retirement plans, two different leave plans, and on and on. The pay schedules were different, the philosophies behind them were different, so just as with all other fire department affairs, we found that they were duplicate but different in almost every respect.

Isman: And has one of them survived or are you administering a dual pay plan for those in existence, and single pay plan, single fringe benefit pay plan for those who come in later?

Bennett: Yes, Yes and Yes, to get back to ground zero, the elected mayor of the new municipality, George Sullivan (the former city mayor) was faced with this on a much broader scale than the fire chief. So he just arbitrarily said O.K., from this point forward, until we establish new criterion or new ordinances, we will utilize the former city regulations. Where there were clearly borough

regulations in existence that were not in conflict with city regulations, the borough regulations would be followed. So this suddenly gave everybody a clearer way to go during the first 30 days. At any rate, essentially, it fell back on the former city system. However, in personnel affairs, he readily found that it couldn't be quite that simple because this got into legal ramifications, involving union contract settlements. Fortunately, the fire fighters very readily agreed to let the former city union prevail, because the former borough union was a relatively new union.

As far as fringe benefits are concerned, the former city fire fighters are concerned, the former city fire fighters are under the former city retirement plan.

The former borough fire fighters are under the borough retirement plan. When people hire in now, as a matter of policy, they are being placed in the former borough plan because that's a statewide plan. That's kind of up in the air too, because the administration is having second thoughts that maybe the city plan is the better plan. Even though it appears more costly right now, in the long run, it won't be as costly.

Isman: What happened to an individual with a hundred hours of sick leave on the books when he came over?

Bennett: Every effort was made to preserve equity for everybody involved and insure that all current benefits were maintained.

Isman: When you combine two departments with different operating procedures somewhere you have to come out with a common procedure to let the one group know how to operate with the other group. Were there different procedures?

Bennett: Here again you have to get back to philosophy, because that's what really takes place. When you have a change in administration aside from administrative matters, the philosophy of the top person is bound to have an effect on the organization. In that sense you would probably say that the former city philosophy was the one that prevailed.

As far as operating procedures are concerned, this is another case where we were up against the crunch. All of a sudden we were unified. There had been no plan. We temporarily allowed the departments to operate as they did before consolidation. Then, when we had an opportunity to stop and take a look, we compared the former city method with the former borough method. We did this on dispatch procedures, on training programs, and on all the different operations of the department. My philosophy was "keep that which is good," and throw out that which is poor. We found amazingly, to me

anyway, that we kept about equally from the two departments things that were good, and washed out about equally, things that were poor.

Isman: And so you came out with a new set of operating procedures?

Bennett: Yes. Gradually we have developed a total new method of operation. We've come up with totally new guidelines on administrative affairs. Now we have a guiding document in the department called the administrative manual. This was the former city fire department method of management, and we have just now, as a matter of fact, after all these months, finally gotten it completed. Deputy Chief John Franklin had the job and he finally completed it. It spells out clearly the steps for everything. Whether a person has a death in the family and needs special leave or whether you're reporting an accident of an apparatus or whatever, is all spelled out in this book. It has incorporated the rules of the new municipality where none existed.

Isman: This leads into training. Has your training program now changed in any way or are you training a different method of evolution for example, have those evolutions changed or have you had to put out a new training manual?

Bennett: Well I'd have to say yes and no to all of that. We rely to a large extent on training being given by company officers and battalion chiefs on the line. They're very competent people. At the time of unification, we had two training chiefs, one for each Department. I knew at the time that the former city training chief was going to retire shortly. So I got those two people together, knowing that we would end up having the one.

Fortunately, that made a cutback unnecessary. One was briefed on former city method, while the other one learned the borough method. What the new training chief has done, in effect, is to formulate a totally new program with somewhat a departure from both. He has just completed, by the way, a probationary test, listing the different areas that a person must be proficient in, with a place for an officer to sign.

Isman: A skill check-off sheet.

Bennett: A skill check-off sheet—right. And it is a loose leaf binder about 1/2 inch thick. This is based really on the new standards that have been adopted nationally.

Isman: NFPA Standard 1001.

Bennett: 1001—right. The thing really is predicated on persons actually demonstrating skills. There is less reliance on written tests, and more reliance on the person actually performing the skills and its very comprehensive. I am very pleased with it. And, what we are doing here is

actually evolving new programs.

Isman: As far as fire prevention code, building code and your fire prevention enforcement program, was that in any way affected by consolidation?

Bennett: Yes. We had two different methods again, before consolidation. The building safety function was actually under the director of public safety of the borough, who also was the super chief of the fire department. The former city had a system where the building official was a separate entity unto himself. As a result of unification, we, here again, reached a compromise situation where the building

“. . . keep that which is good,  
and throw out that which  
is bad . . .”

official is a separate entity. He was the authority to approve occupancy and reconstruction. However, the mayor had given us the authority to review the plans and advise the building official on whether an occupancy certificate should be granted. So we really, I think, have a very workable arrangement, in light of the fact that we have fire inspectors physically located right in the building official's office.

Isman: Would you just talk a little bit about your new arson squad? Has consolidation given you a pool of manpower to place emphasis on this important area?

Bennett: Well this was another pleasant surprise. Kind of a spin-off benefit in unification. It threw together a crew of 14, very experienced and capable people in the new combined Fire Prevention Division. Out of these 14, there are six very competent people in the field of investigation—very knowledgeable, very well qualified. In fact, one of them from the former borough came up with a new technique of using a sophisticated method of photography to prove that hydrocarbons were used in the start of a fire. It's a new technique and as far as I know, we're the first department in the country to use this in a case. This is one where we had unusual incentive, because of the death of a fire fighter, either to prove or disprove arson. Getting back to your original question, both former departments had arson detection as kind of an extra duty of the fire prevention division. They were both fairly competent. But the number of apprehensions really wasn't all too high, certainly not high enough to satisfy me. So, now that we have the division

consolidated into a larger, more workable unit, my intention is to select the three most competent people in arson investigation, and put them into a separate unit that will answer directly to the Chief of the Department, in the same fashion that the Seattle Fire Department is doing. A recent report, done by John Fullenwider, our chief inspector, shows that arson is quite a sizeable chunk of our total fire loss, just as it is elsewhere, and we're going to tackle the problem.

Isman: One of the things in combining various departments is the difficulty in overcoming the feeling among the

personnel that they are still in separate departments. How have you fostered the idea that there is only one department?

Bennett: We mixed them up. There is now pretty close to a total mix. I would guess that no more than 45 percent of the original two groups are still in their places of employment at the time of consolidation. I expected some static, some feedback, but I didn't get a bit of feedback to me directly. I did get some indirectly from the other officers, but personnel themselves seemed to be suddenly relieved when the big shake-up came, and they were redistributed. It actually seemed to be a release for them, because they just had the feeling that something big was going to happen. This was really undermining us a little bit, this impending doom feeling.

Isman: Would you recommend that this kind of a move be undertaken very shortly after a consolidation?

Bennett: Yes, I would recommend that it be done sooner than it was done here. There was a misunderstanding, unfortunately, I think among the administrative staff. I had directed the people be transferred within two weeks after I was appointed. Well there was about a 50% mix effective at that time. However, after two weeks, all of a sudden I realized one day that these people were all back where they were before, with four exceptions. It was all a matter of misunderstanding. The chief officers responsible for it, had thought that it was just to be a temporary thing, to meet personnel from the other department and then put them back in their original station. In any case, early transfers are important to ease anxiety

and promote a feeling for the new department.

Isman: Have you found a personnel turnover or retirements increasing since consolidation?

Bennett: No!

Isman: No increase?

Bennett: In fact, one thing that I had going for me, and this is a personal asset I suppose, is that apparently I have a pretty good reputation for handling personnel fairly. The reception I got was not enthusiastic by any means, but the personnel recognized that they were under an administrator who personally was not going to give them any unfair treatment. So there weren't any sudden resignations or retirements. The former city department had a very low turnover before consolidation. That same pattern of low turn-over continues department-wide now. The key to success here is that the personnel must have confidence in the administrator's fair treatment.

Isman: Now that your department is protecting a much larger area, do you anticipate an increase in the number of personnel because of additional stations necessary for protection?

Bennett: Well, yes and no. The additional stations were already in the capital improvement mill of the former borough before unification. So, at this point, I'm in a position, whether I like it or not, of being propelled along a railroad track by a train that was already running away before. I believe it was a runaway train, going too far too fast. It's going to be costly for a time for those people in the municipality that are here during the next five years. From then on it will be an appropriate funding level for the development and the population at that time, so they will be able to support it without any pains. At any rate, the development that was already in the mill is the only development that is taking place now, and in fact some of it had been cut back. For example, I eliminated a separate 1/4 million dollar paramedic station, as well as a ladder truck that would have cost something on the order of \$200,000. At the same time, I have redirected some things in ways that are going to give a much better return for the community in fire protection. In balance, it appears that we're saving approximately \$300,000 under what would have been spent if the unification had not taken place. That's just in capital outlay.

Isman: Are there any other difficulties that you have experienced that we might not have covered that might be of interest to some of the other fire chiefs who would be considering consolidation or having consolidation brought to them?

Bennett: Yes. I think one key thing in particular, is that I would advocate to

anybody who is swept into this situation, that I've just gone through, that you go in with a totally open mind about the people in a new combined organization. I tried, for example, to go into this with the attitude that I didn't even know the former city fire department personnel. I went into it looking at everybody as honestly and objectively as I could. Of course that isn't totally true because those people whose full careers I was familiar with definitely had an edge over somebody whose full career I was unfamiliar with. But I tried to be as objective as I could, and if you take a look at the organization chart right now, you'll find that there is a pretty even balance in the different levels of position. And what I've done is to take advantage of the best man for each particular job. I've drawn people from both former departments for key positions.

Isman: Your new organization is a Chief, and then a deputy chief, and then assistant chiefs of divisions?

Bennett: Right. There are four divisions in the department. Those divisions are Fire and Rescue Operations, which some people call suppression; an Emergency Medical Service division which is the paramedics; Fire Prevention Division, which means code enforcement, arson investigation, public education, and so on; and Support Services, which is budget, apparatus maintenance and supply.

Isman: And where does training fit into the organization?

Bennett: Training is under the Fire and Rescue Division, the Chief of Operations.

Isman: One final question. Knowing what you know now, do you think consolidation was a good idea for the Anchorage area?

Bennett: Not in the manner that it took place. But unfortunately, I don't know how you could change that. There was bitter rivalry there between two governments. You had two different groups of citizens, one was the old timer and the other was the newcomer. Now what made unification possible was the fact that there were so many new people that had moved into the area, who didn't care about the old days. All they saw was Anchorage as it is now. However, this rivalry left consolidation uncertain for a long time. There was no prior planning whatsoever, but the climate was such that it would have been impossible to have objective planning beforehand.

Considering the obstacles that existed at the time of consolidation, I feel that we made the change as painlessly as possible.

Isman: Thank you very much for your time Chief Bennett. I am sure that your experiences, both positive and negative, will help other fire chiefs faced with the difficulties of consolidation. I am sure with your interest and determination, the Anchorage Fire Department will continue to provide excellent service to its citizens.

## conference & workshops

The Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory announces a Conference and Workshops on **EMERGENCY INCIDENT COMMAND - CONTROL COMMUNICATIONS**. The program will commence February 28, 1977 through March 2, 1977 at the Howard County Facility at Johns Hopkins Road and Route 29, Howard County, Maryland.

Registration is limited to 150 attendees on a first come first served basis. Advanced registration fee is \$50.00, payable immediately. After February 1, 1977 the registration fee will be \$60.00.

The meeting is expressly for members of the fire service and representatives of government agencies and industry concerned with practice, procedures, methods, and equipment used in emergency incident command, control, and communications.

The Keynote Address will be delivered by Joseph Batchelor of NFPCA and Support Addresses by Deputy Chief James Estep, Prince Georges County Fire Department and Jack Whippen.

Session I convenes at 10:45 a.m. on Monday, February 28, 1977 with a discussion of **EMERGENCY INCIDENT**

**INFORMATION RESOURCES**; Session II at 2:00p.m. is a workshop on **CONCURRENT INFORMATION RESOURCES**. Session III convenes Tuesday, March 1, 1977 at 8:45a.m. with the topic **EMERGENCY INCIDENT COMMAND**; Session IV's topic at 11:00a.m. is **EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS**; Session V at 2:00p.m. is **WORKSHOPS on COMMUNICATIONS and SUPPORT EQUIPMENT** and at 7:00p.m. is the **EMERGENCY INCIDENT DEMONSTRATION EXERCISE**.

On Wednesday, March 2, 1977 at 8:45a.m. Session VI's topic will be **EMERGENCY CONTROL**; Session VII at 11:00a.m. discusses **MOBILE UNIT DESIGN CONCEPTS** and Session VIII at 1:00p.m. closes the program with a **SUMMARY and EVALUATION** of the workshops and conference.

For further information contact:  
Mr. Byron M. Halpin  
Fire Problem Program  
The Johns Hopkins University  
Applied Physics Laboratory  
Johns Hopkins Road  
Laurel, Maryland 20810  
Telephone: (301)953-7100 and 792-7800