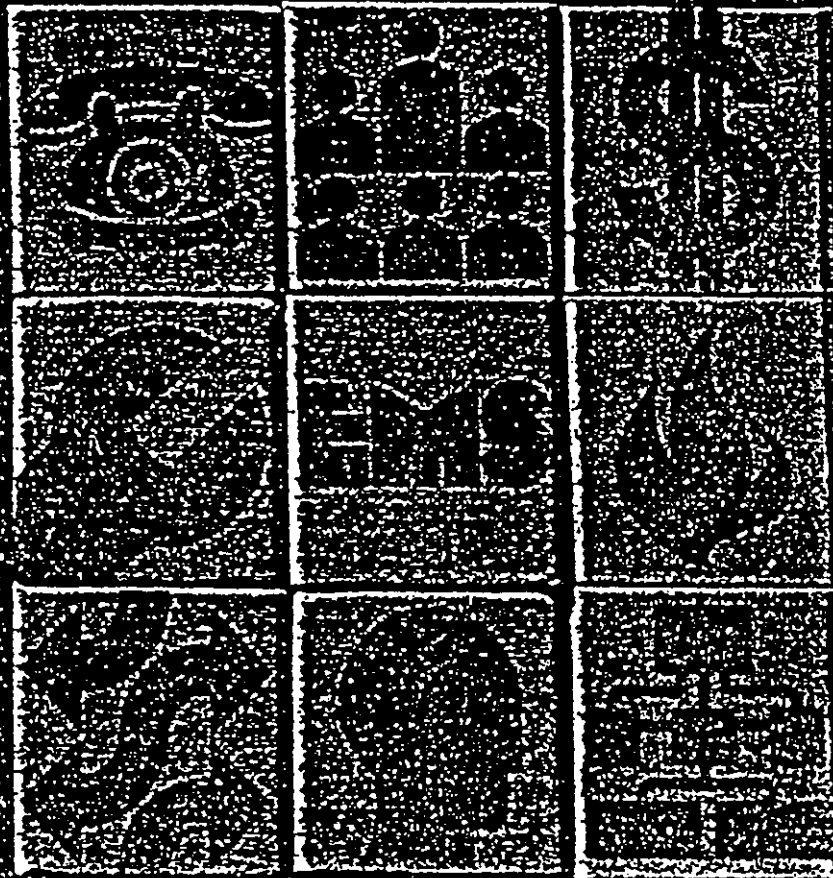


SF-Consolidation
(REGIONAL)

FIRE DEPARTMENT MERGERS

Fast-growing areas often face one of two extremes-- overlapping services or no services at all. When this happens, some kind of merger of the area's fire departments seems to offer the most cost-efficient approach to delivery of emergency services. Five alternative models for merger are introduced as a basis for comparison. Each model would have an impact on the following nine areas of major concern: communications, training, purchasing and supply, maintenance, EMS, fire loss management, station distribution, management/labor, and, most important of all, the human element.



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FEMA - 11/95

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Orange County, like many areas in the Sun Belt, has experienced unprecedented growth in the past two decades. This growth has placed severe demands on units of government to provide basic fire, rescue, and emergency medical services to its citizens.

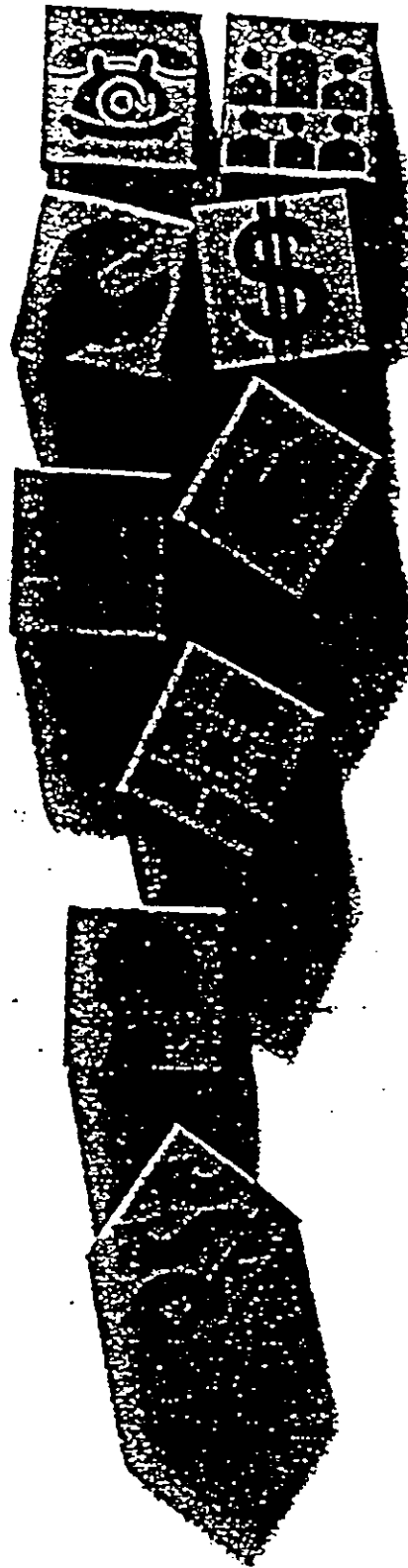
In Orange County, rapid population growth resulted in the formation of a megalopolis centering on the city of Orlando. In some areas of the county, fire and EMS services were being duplicated; in others, they were nonexistent. These developing areas were segmented through zoning, and hampered by a tax structure that provided for a \$25,000 homestead exemption that effectively eliminated many residences from the tax rolls. The result: definite "have" and "have not" fire districts.

It was evident that because of the multiplicity of government and private fire agencies involved, a loss of efficiency, effectiveness, potential cost savings, and quality enhancement existed. Finally, through legislative endeavors, a vehicle was created that allowed 16 fire districts to be combined into one county fire department.

Created June 1, 1981, the Orange County Fire Department replaced the heretofore segmented fire service that existed outside Orlando. The department is presently in the process of establishing itself as a viable governmental entity serving the citizens of this fast-growing community. This does not mean, however, that the actions taken either before or after merger were greeted with hosannas by all segments of the community. In fact, just the opposite was true.

During the formative period, the department experienced more mistakes and failures than successes. However, we learned from these mistakes. We also share the resiliency and flexibility of the fire service to respond to adversity, both tangible and intangible. For these reasons, I believe this young department is destined to achieve an ultimate high level of success.

An outgrowth of these 2½ years of endeavor has been some basic guidelines for resource maximization, which may provide other "growth area" communities with alternative models for evaluation, and a possible



AREAS OF CONCERN

- Communications
- Training
- Purchasing
- Maintenance
- EMS
- Fire loss management
- Station distribution
- Management/labor
- Human element

resolution to their needs. Conversely, older communities that are losing population and whose business and industry are moving out may find these guidelines useful models for sharing governmental resources.

The critical issue facing all governmental agencies today is how to balance the citizens' demand for increased services against the concurrent demand by these same citizens for reduced cost of government. If any headway is to be made, neighboring governmental units must explore, in a cooperative manner, a restructuring process that considers alternative methods of utilizing existing manpower, equipment, and allied support resources in a more efficient and effective manner, irrespective of political jurisdictions.

If you were to review the governmental data of neighboring communities, you would find that there is indeed a potential (if political and legal constraints are ignored) for enhancing service, both qualitatively and quantitatively, and for either reducing the cost of government or expending current funds in a more efficient manner.

Possible alternatives

Just for a moment, open your mind, put aside traditional philosophies, and direct your thoughts and experiences toward creating a better, more responsive, effective, and efficient fire and rescue service. Let me begin by briefly examining five alternative models both for structure and for the enhancement of services presently offered. These services include fire, rescue, EMS, fire loss management, communications, training, administration, planning, and support services. The county government will serve as the bench mark or point of departure. Here are the models:

1. County government assumes responsibility for all services listed above.

2. The county is divided into four sections, with each section independently responsible for providing the above services for the people living in that section.

3. A council of governments is formed to provide a policy umbrella under which each unit of government within the county, while maintaining its own autonomy, merges functionally to use existing equipment and manpower and to share support services.

4. The existing configuration of service delivery systems remains the same but, where feasible, units of government voluntarily unite to initi-

centralized support services.

3. A regional authority that ignores even county boundaries is established to deliver services; the structural model for this alternative is the regional airport authority concept.

Areas of concern

There are several areas of major concern to consider during this mental exercise:

Communications. One of the key elements in any modern public safety delivery system is an effective and efficient communications system. It is imperative, therefore, that all existing communication systems within the county be surveyed and a model be developed leading to the centralization of 911, civil defense, fire, rescue, and EMS in one emergency operating center.

Training. Regardless of the model or combination of models that might ultimately prove successful in your area, you should begin to work toward standardization of training. The benefits to be derived from maximizing the use of existing training staffs, community college and technical institute resources, along with central and regional or satellite training centers, are too great to be overlooked.

Purchasing and supply. A tremendous cost savings can be realized by a consortium of public safety entities combining to purchase and distribute equipment and supplies. These savings would be contingent, of course, upon the ability of the consortium members to agree on specifications for major equipment, clothing, protective equipment, and expendable supplies.

Maintenance. Present-day costs and projected future costs of emergency apparatus dictate that a central maintenance and fleet-management program be established. The money saved by bulk purchasing alone should support a central maintenance facility. A feasibility study should be undertaken of this critical area. Among other things, it should address the feasibility of creating a comprehensive program of purchasing; extending apparatus life through refurbishing, repowering, and preventive maintenance; and establishing a procedure for the planned replacement of all rolling stock.

Emergency medical services. Within the public safety delivery system, EMS is the fastest growing element in terms of both citizen demand and cost to government. An intense effort should be made to formulate a system that maximizes the

existing human resources in the delivery of EMS. Strong attention should also be given to the funding mechanism supporting this service. This is a very emotional issue—internally and externally—and requires a great deal of sensitivity, yet a properly conducted study could result in cost savings to government while at the same time enhancing the system both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Fire loss management. The cornerstone of any modern fire agency is its fire loss management bureau. Plans review and code enforcement are critical to developers and residents alike, providing an invaluable resource to the would-be builder and developer and thus helping to ensure the economic well-being of the community. This aspect of the bureau's work is the single most important area for building the credibility of government.

The bureau is also responsible for arson investigation and fire prevention education, and for training the employees who will conduct these programs.

The diversity of governments and the various demographic conditions that exist in any county make it doubly important that building plans be reviewed and building codes be interpreted uniformly, that fire safety education be developed, and criminal arson be investigated and prosecuted. This work of the fire loss management bureau could be handled effectively on a countywide basis whether or not other services are merged.

Station distribution. A cursory examination of station distribution when looked at as a composite of fire defenses of a county will point up the need for a comprehensive station location study. Once the service delivery mode of fire, rescue, and EMS is established and agreed upon, the following must be addressed:

- Time/distance factors
 - Work load distribution
 - Target hazards
 - Potential life and property hazards
 - Distribution of population by density and age
 - Water systems, or lack thereof
 - Support service demand
 - Equipment mix and demand
 - Manpower requirements
 - Station obsolescence in terms of location and physical condition
- A thorough study of station distribution should turn up significant opportunities for dramatic cost reductions along with a concurrent increase in efficiency and effective delivery of service.

Management/labor. The myri-

ad of contractual relationships that exist in many counties dictates a Herculean effort on the part of all concerned if any form of merger is to succeed. Toward this end, task forces should be formed composed of representatives from all the concerned entities and from all ranks. This area of study is of the utmost importance and calls for an immediate and ongoing in-depth analysis if a manageable, meaningful, and healthy relationship is to exist between labor and management initially and in the future.

Human element. An organization's most important resource is its people. Consideration of any form of merger tends to generate fear and strong emotional feelings among those affected. Many of the perceived fears are unfounded, but that doesn't make the feelings any less real, and this fact should be recognized and addressed. It would behoove any community facing such change to spend the largest portion of its study resources to bring in skilled facilitators to establish quality circles and hold team-building sessions in order to solicit meaningful input from the various employees. Building a "chain of bridges" will be necessary if any success is to be realized from the potential of merger.

Existing fears and concerns must be confronted frankly and openly by both employer and employee. This is a basic tenant. Furthermore, the posture must be positive. In my opinion, 80% of the barriers to a more efficient and cost-effective fire, rescue, and EMS delivery service in any county would be circumvented if more personnel were involved in the decision making, if staffing charts were identified in advance, and if promotional opportunities were spelled out and implemented by professional testing and placement procedures.

Master planning

As any study progresses, inertia tends to set in. The overall focus is segmented into specific areas of study. Therefore, as individual concerns are addressed, a concurrent comprehensive planning study should be undertaken.

One of the elements of this study should be the formation of a master planning task force. Along with representatives from the local fire service and governmental entities, the task force should include representative citizens who reflect the various interests within the community. This task force should then be charged

with identifying problems and recommending solutions that focus on the level of service desired.

Emerging from such a study, if it is properly conducted and completed, will be a road map for the future. A master plan for fire protection, like a road-building program or a future utility plan, will be an invaluable tool to legislators and administrators.

Five models

The following five models are presented in outline form and in a positive format. The information on which they are based is drawn from the brief discussions above. Many, and sometimes extreme, variables can and will present themselves to skew existing data. Nevertheless, these models, or combinations of models that might emerge from the proposed in-depth studies, may serve the needs of the fire service, the various governmental entities within a county and, most important, the citizens of the county.

Model 1: Total responsibility by county government. This model provides for centralized administration and control of all public safety services through:

- More effective distribution of equipment and manpower
- Standardization of equipment and procedures
- Merging of dispatch services
- Establishment of an effective span of control and administration
- Standardization of training
- Maximization of the resources of vocational-technical institutes and community colleges, enabling better use of education and training delivery systems and funding mechanisms
- Utilization of telecommunications to enhance internal communications and to reduce training costs and increase delivery of educational and training modules
- Provision of increased services while cutting expenditures for such services
- Implementation of "central services," resulting in a dramatic cost savings.

Although the county model may be the most difficult to enact, it provides for the most efficient delivery of public safety services, and addresses the question of future growth in a more systematic and effective manner.

Model 2: Sectionalization: Your preliminary investigation may indicate that your county would lend itself to a four-section or quadrant delivery system. Under this model, four autonomous areas would be es-

tablished, each governed by its own separate government or by a council of existing governments within each section.

Model 2 would offer many of the same savings and efficiencies as Model 1, but certainly to a lesser degree. On the other hand, because of the smaller size, the citizens of a section should be able to identify more closely with their fire service and smaller unit of government. If further study suggests that this model is the most feasible for your area, a concerted effort should be made to unify the central support services, as suggested earlier.

Model 3: Functional merger. Under this model, the involved units of government, while retaining their own autonomy, would voluntarily strive to merge smaller units of government and enter into first-in response agreements. Under functional merger, the county's fire and medical problem areas would be analyzed and "demand zones" established. Incident response within these zones would occur, regardless of territorial boundaries, by the nearest unit or units capable of handling the life or property hazard that presents itself.

Governmental merger of this type is predicated on joint training and standardization of procedures by the units of government involved if ultimate effectiveness is to be achieved. Centralized communications also increase efficiency and speed up delivery of service.

Under functional merger, the main focus is on the citizens and their need for service, rather than the jurisdictional boundaries of government. Such a venture, if properly implemented, should lead to cooperative exploration of other areas of mutual assistance, such as centralized purchasing, education, training, and maintenance.

Model 4: Status quo. Under this model, each unit of government retains its existing policies of manpower and equipment distribution, but would strive to establish a central services bureau. The basis for cooperation is the immediate dollar savings to be realized by each unit of government when it pools its monetary resources in the areas of purchasing, supply, maintenance, and training and education. Furthermore, as demands upon government increase and revenues shrink, this consortium approach establishes a precedent for further voluntary joining and sharing of like resources across a broader delivery base.

It should be noted, however, that

although it is the most easily accomplished, model 4 brings the least tangible return for the effort.

Model 5: Regionalization. Regionalization demands the greatest vision. All jurisdictional lines, including county lines of authority, must be ignored. Planning must overlap county lines and service areas. Existing and future growth should be explored based on need and resource availability.

A jurisdictional authority analogous to a regional airport authority model would be established. A policy-making board, whether elected or appointed, would have authority over fire, rescue, and emergency medical services within the jurisdiction, along with all supporting services. (Can you imagine what this model would do for the economy of scale and for the professionalization of the fire services?)

Because growth areas tend to overlap county lines, just as declining areas are not confined to a single jurisdiction, regionalization should not be overlooked as a model to serve our present and future needs. The potential for total maximization of resources and services under this model is intriguing, perhaps even necessary.

Need for change

Government exists to protect life and property. Yet the ability of government to provide these basic and essential services is being severely challenged by the paradoxical demand of its citizens—to maintain and increase services yet reduce the costs of providing such services. Change, or the exploration of change, is necessary if government is to address and satisfy this paradox.

We are all aware that even the mere mention of change can cause great turmoil in the fire service. Yet, with the increased talk about privatization among city officials, and the resurrection of the public safety officer concept, we know that some kind of change is inevitable. As one of my former mentors used to say, "We don't face problems, rather we are presented with disguised and unique opportunities."

The local neighborhood fire department can no longer afford the pride of parochialism, if high-level delivery of essential services is to be maintained. However, if combined units of government, on a regional basis, could merge their resources in a logical manner for the protection of their citizens, what a marvelous prototype might emerge. ■