

Consolidation/region Answers for the future?

For Reference

By Chief Charles H. Rule
Consulting Editor

Not to be taken from this room

The immediate future for fire service funding is bleak. Many elements are causing this, most of which are tied to the economy.

Hopes are being heard that the peace dividend will jump-start the economy. But be assured that the federal deficit, the drug problem, health care, crime and the homeless will absorb any excess funds before they trickle down to the fire service.

State government mandates to local government to provide services, without also sending the needed money, will further limit the pool of resources for which the fire service is competing. We will also see reduced levels of state services, and the functions will be passed down to local governments. California, for example, is in the process of downsizing the State Fire Marshal's Office. The gap will be filled by local government, or not at all.

Proponents of mini-maxi codes will arise, under the guise of "affordable housing." Until such states as New Jersey, Virginia and others were ready to start funding local fire service efforts, they should have avoided enacting

educational opportunities for the fire service. It also puts us under closer scrutiny by the public and the media, and in the future, we will have to justify our tactical operations more than ever before. The Hackensack (N.J.) Fire Department and Los Angeles Police Department are only two examples of what we can expect more of. Related to that, I believe the near future will see the family of a firefighter killed in the line of duty suing a local government for not providing adequate live fire training.

We can expect to see a major disaster in a stadium or arena where fireworks and other pyrotechnics are discharged. This is being done in open and domed stadiums with occupant loads of tens of thousands. Will the local fire department be held accountable for permitting this activity when a disaster occurs?

Not long ago, a football game in New Orleans' domed stadium was delayed when the results of fireworks, which could have dropped on the crowd, set the Astroturf on fire. People on the sidelines extinguished the fire — with Gatorade.

The 24-hour work shift will continue to be under attack as inefficient. No one can justify the productivity of this work schedule, but it's a fiscal reality that 24-hour shifts are an economic savings for financially ailing cities.

Changing the 56-hour work week to a 40-hour one requires additional personnel to maintain staffing levels. Options are to fund the work week reduction, reduce staffing levels or experiment with the 10-hour-day, 14-hour-night schedule that is popular in some areas. Our service requires an effective, reliable system.

The issue of police/fire consolidation will surface in many jurisdictions, as will private contract fire protection. Are you comfortable that you could justify what you're doing now compared to ei-

ther of these possibilities?

With the current trend of federal and state mandates on environmental issues, and with local government once again getting stuck with enforcement, is the fire service ready to take on these additional responsibilities?

Some departments have already made that move. Air-quality sampling, hazardous waste disposal management and similar services are potential avenues for agencies facing "justification of existence" issues. It might not be that different from the city-wide code enforcement under fire service leadership that has been going on in many jurisdictions for years. On the other hand, many departments still resist incorporating EMS into their operations.

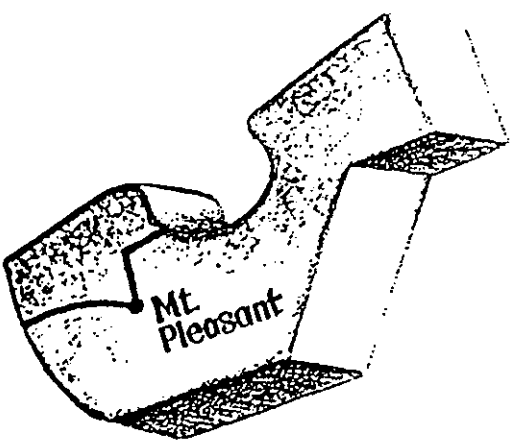
With people continuing to move out of the cities in pursuit of a better quality of life, the urban-wildland interface will place a heavy burden on suburban and rural fire protection services. Moreover, many of the solutions, such as comprehensive vegetation management and banning wood shingle roofs, aren't always in areas of responsibility the fire service can directly control.

The fire service continues to suffer the disadvantage of not having measurable standards for staffing engines and ladder companies based on community risk. What percentage of commercial occupancies is sprinklered? What is the average age of the jurisdiction's buildings?

The costliest element in a fire department's budget is personnel, but staffing has not been examined, except for the Dallas studies in the mid-80s. Departments are demanding minimum staffing that ranges from two to five, without any factual data to justify requests. If you are budgeting for company staffing of 15, are three five-person companies preferable to five three-person companies? Do we reduce company size and use flying personnel squads? When we

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these codes, thus preventing localities from determining the level of service they'll provide.

The proliferation of inexpensive VCRs and videocams has certainly permitted increased training and



Illustration by Walt Floyd

talk about staffing, should we also look at quality, such as in training or physical fitness?

The above is, unfortunately, a relatively brief forecast of gloom and doom. If you want more, just watch the evening news. Though certain parts of the country are doing better or worse than others, it's a rare department that has ample resources to serve its constituency.

Despite these negative factors and disasters-waiting-to-happen, we will still be expected to provide quality service. That is the real world.

The remaining years of this century will present the American fire service with its greatest challenge ever. Some will face this as a problem, while others will see it as an opportunity. If the turf and ego mentality that has prevented progress in the past prevails, outsid-

ers will determine the fire service's future direction.

Fortunately, at least some approaches are available to the fire service. Probably the most promising, yet one that many fire service managers and elected officials see as a threat, is regional or county consolidation of fire services, which can range from one functional consolidation to total political consolidation.

Unfortunately, jurisdictional boundary lines aren't determined based on response time or access. Here in San Joaquin County (Calif.), a population of less than half a million is served by 28 fire agencies.

Annexations in particular develop a crazy political subdivision that looks more like a patchwork quilt than a rational protection-service area. Many times, jurisdic-

tions will leapfrog to desired tax base areas and leave pockets of non-revenue-generating problems for others to protect. When I lived in Wisconsin, I would occasionally see a unit responding to a fire go right past another jurisdiction's fire station.

Local loyalty isn't what it once was. Some people think the city's name has to be on the side of the truck, but in our more mobile society, people just care about service.

A consolidated fire service would overcome these political boundary issues, because the closest units respond to the emergency. If the public has reason to trust that emergency responders will be prompt, well equipped and competent, it will accept and even demand consolidation.

Consolidation offers many other

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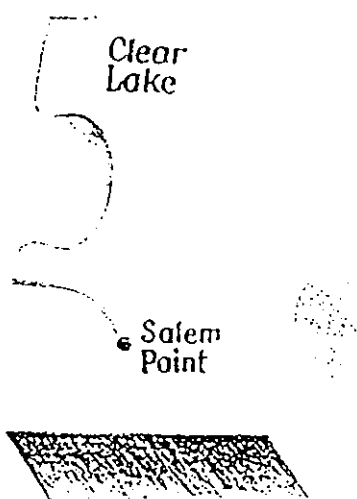
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potential benefits.

- Central dispatch facilities. Here in Manteca, we were facing a \$200,000 annual bill for fire dispatch, because of growth and needed update of dispatch services. Instead, as of the beginning of December, we are dispatched through the computer-aided system operated by the City of Stockton, nine miles away. Our police department is happier without the extra workload of fire dispatch. And just \$25,000 a year gets us three dispatchers on duty at a time, with EMD capability, instead of the single one our \$200,000 would have bought. Stockton now dispatches their own department, seven other fire departments and rural districts, and numerous private ambulance companies.
- Lower apparatus replacement requirements. Larger departments need fewer pieces of reserve apparatus for an equal number of front-line rigs. Consolidation also reduces the expensive duplication of specialized apparatus like aerials and hazmat units.
- Enhanced career opportunities. Although the number of people at the topmost echelons is reduced, the organization as a whole is larger, which means that someone is always retiring or moving elsewhere. With this steady overall turnover, bright young officers have greater opportunities for advancement.
- Joint training facilities. We continue to send personnel to structural fires without giving them training in the hot, dark, toxic environment in which they are expected to perform. Regional burn facilities, acceptable to the EPA, could mitigate this problem.
- Specialization of various functions. Smaller departments can't afford full-time training or code-enforcement officers, for example. A regional department, however, can well afford full-time slots in areas like hazmat, code enforcement and arson investigation.
- Potential ISO rating improvements.
- Cost reductions through volume purchasing.
- Fewer fire stations, because of larger-scale planning.
- Faster response time.
- More efficient allocation of personnel.
- Increased service levels for same dollars spent.
- Regionalized public-information and -education programs.

- Consistent system-wide code requirements.
- Elimination of redundancy, resulting in cost savings.
- Better future use of resources and reorganization.
- Other benefits unique to local conditions. Two possibilities include uniform, stabilized pay scales and savings through consolidation of pension resources.

The above represent opportunities to move forward in the next decade. Obviously, the chief should provide the leadership to objectively pursue areas of consolidation. One way could be through an



enlightened county fire chiefs association. The chiefs must support it and market it to the electoral bodies of the jurisdictions involved.

The labor groups must be involved from early on and convinced of consolidation's merits. If they are not included in the planning process, it is doomed to failure.

A related point is that consolidation can't be a disguise for a reduction-in-force. If regionalization is used to get rid of positions, it will fail. Consolidation's cost savings come primarily on the capital side, not from the personnel side. The fact is that consolidation usually reduces personnel levels slightly in any case, by triggering a spate of early retirements. The remaining personnel should be sufficient to provide superior service within the enlarged jurisdiction.

The public must be sold on the concept through the media and ap-

pearances by local chiefs at civic groups to explain the reasons and the process to be used. Doing this might first require a fire protection benefit assessment of the proposed consolidation. A decision will be needed as to what is preferred: a long series of incremental, functional consolidations, or a massive total merger.

In the past, little was written on how to proceed with consolidation, and there have been failures because of lack of study and poor marketing. Recently, however, the International City Management Association has published *A Systematic Approach to Fire Service Consolidation and Merger*, which discusses methods used by the Tualatin Valley (Ore.) area to consolidate several departments.

We can also look beyond our borders. Great Britain, which had 1,500 fire brigades prior to World War II, currently has 64 to cover all of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. New Zealand has merged 276 separate fire brigades into one National Fire Service, supporting 10,000 paid and volunteer personnel under a single entity.

There is no panacea to the issues facing the fire service, but consolidation and regionalization is an answer in many areas of this country. It is not an easy sell and should be approached as a long-term process. Some functional consolidation efforts (central dispatching, for example) might require initial outlays of money that will pay dividends in future years.

If it's planned carefully and properly marketed, support for consolidation will be greater than resistance. Those who object will often have a problem with turf, ego or a special interest.

I view the study, promotion, planning, implementation and evaluation of consolidation as a giant step forward to resolving some of the economic turmoil affecting the fire service in this country.

The problems of the future have no easy solutions. The fire service must initiate programs to deal with these crises, or outsiders will make the changes. □

Charles H. Rule is chief of the Manteca (Calif.) Fire Department, the fifth department he has headed since 1960. He is also a graduate of Oklahoma State University.

A Systematic Approach to Fire Service Consolidation and Merger, International City Management Association, #CLHS(40599), \$17.00. Call 800-745-8780.