

Countywide fire service saves

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2F-Consolidation-Regional

By merging five fire tax districts into one unified countywide district, this Florida county has been able to improve fire protection and emergency services, lower its ISO rating, and save taxpayers over half a million dollars.

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Is it possible to save money and provide better fire service at the same time? In Pasco County, Florida, the answer is yes. The county runs a successful, countywide fire service that depends on both paid county firefighters and dedicated teams of volunteers.

One of the key reasons for Pasco's success is merger. But to understand how and why it works, you first need to know something about Pasco County.

County profile

Pasco moved from a rural-oriented county in early 1970 to one of the fastest growing counties in the nation a decade later. The U.S. Census Bureau counted 194,000 people in Pasco County in 1980, up a dramatic 156% from the 1970 population of 76,000. That big jump made Pasco's rate of growth the third highest in the state of Florida.

Pasco County is in the popular Tampa Bay growth area but is different from other high-growth sunbelt areas in that it has no dominant city force—like a Dallas, an Atlanta, or a Phoenix. The county contains six small municipalities, four of which have their own fire service.

About 80% of the population lives in the unincorporated area of the county. In addition, most of the population—largely retirees from the North—has settled on the west side of the county along the Gulf of Mexico. Central Pasco is largely undeveloped except near the southern border, where there is quick access to the city of Tampa. Otherwise, central Pasco is mainly fields and forests, with little need for fire protection for people. But brush fires are frequent and can present big problems for firefighters. The east side of the county is largely rural, with citrus growing, cattle raising, and agriculture as the main industries.

In the early 1970s, except for the municipalities, all fire service was provided by volunteer fire departments that relied on subscriptions and donations to cover their costs. In the most rapidly growing area of the county, southwest Pasco, the volunteer department ran into serious difficulty during the 1974 economic slump—subscriptions fell off drastically, a problem that is probably being repeated elsewhere in the nation today. Only 35% of the residents were paying the subscription fee. So 45% of the people were enjoying the security of fire service without paying one dime for it. In addition, only 10% of the total business and industrial community subscribed.

This lack of subscriptions and non-payment by those who received fire service made it financially impossible for the volunteer department to keep up with growth. There was no up-front money to purchase equipment needed to answer the ever-growing number of calls for service.

These financial difficulties, and the need to keep pace with Pasco's rapid urbanization, prompted the volunteer fire department and concerned citizens to seek help from the Pasco County Board of Commissioners. They asked the board to create the first municipal service taxing unit for

fire service in the unincorporated area. After holding public hearings, the board approved on September 28, 1974 a county ordinance to do just that. The board also approved a millage rate for the new tax district, but it couldn't take effect until the following year. However, the new fire department was able to borrow tax anticipation notes so that it could provide adequate service to the public in the interim period.

As Pasco County continued to grow, other volunteer fire departments began to experience the same difficulties as the Southwest Fire Unit. The commission decided that interested fire departments and citizens could join the county-run fire service in one of three ways:

- by holding a referendum to approve creation of a fire tax district;
- by submitting to the Board of County Commissioners a petition showing 100% support of the creation of a fire tax district;
- by requesting the Board of County Commissioners to create a fire tax district after public hearings and some show of support among the people and/or the volunteer fire department.

By the end of 1978, five separate fire tax districts had joined the service. The map shows the location of the original five fire tax districts. It also shows all current county, municipal, and volunteer fire departments in Pasco County, with two exceptions. The city of Port Richey now has a contract with the county for fire service, and the Highland Forest Volunteer Fire Department (HFVFD) is now under county control as an independent taxing district. It will eventually come into the countywide fire service.

Like the other volunteer departments, Highland Forest ran into serious financial difficulties in early 1981 and petitioned the county commission to be taken into the countywide system. After studying the matter,

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Pasco County Attorney Gerald A. Figurski recommended that Highland Forest be set up first as an independent taxing district so that a tax rate different from that charged the countywide fire tax district could be assessed. A different tax rate is needed in the beginning because the new district will have to be operated on borrowed money from the County General Fund until the first tax revenues are generated in the fall of 1982. That borrowed money has to be paid back, so residents who live in the district will have to pay a higher rate for the first year.

In the early days of the county fire service, the districts operated independently under a fire chief and a board of advisors, but their budgets were approved by the county commission. It soon became apparent that the quality of fire service needed to be improved, expanded, and stabilized through better management and a sound financial basis. An initial step was made in this direction in 1976 when the commission created the position of fire coordinator so that one person would oversee the operations of all five district fire departments.

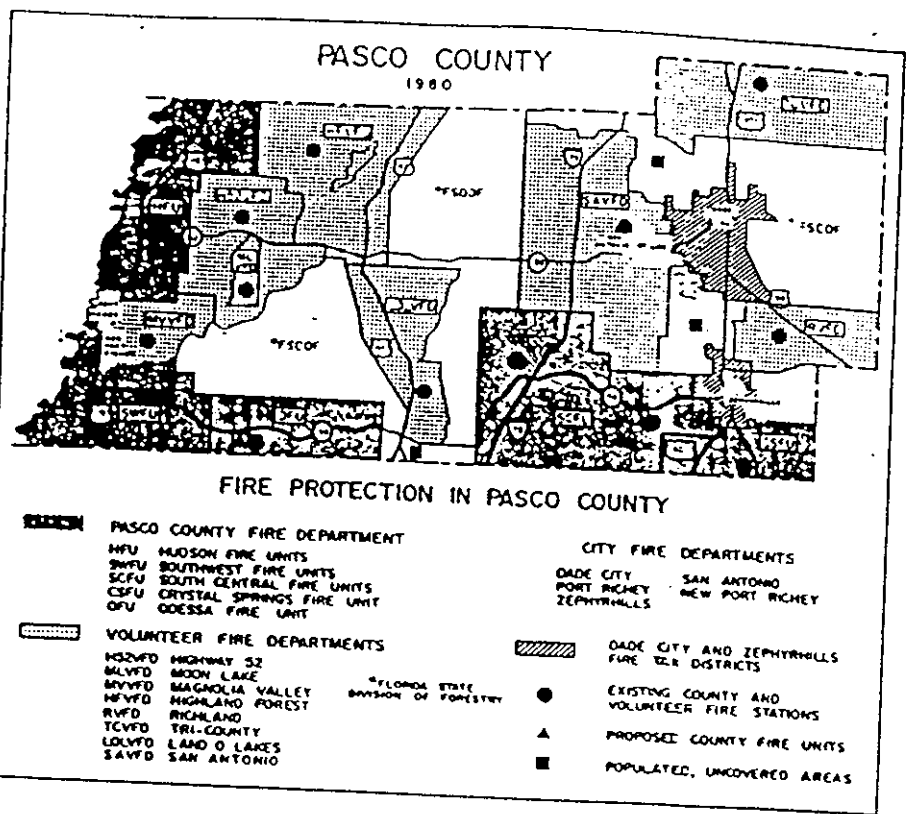
Need for merger

Although the five fire tax districts were tied into three geographic areas (especially in terms of coordinating emergency calls through a central dispatch system), they were largely independent of each other. There were differences in the millage rates, in the amount of upfront money available for new equipment, and in manpower levels, facilities, and other factors.

In an effort to improve fire protection within the county system, give equal service to all citizens living in the various districts, and save tax dollars, the county commission decided to truly merge the five separate municipal service fire tax units into one countywide municipal fire tax district.

The major goals of the proposed merger were:

1. To unify, improve, and equalize fire service throughout the countywide system.
2. To further centralize management and reduce administrative costs.
3. To avoid duplication of facilities and equipment.
4. To strengthen the purchasing power of all districts through bulk purchasing.
5. To achieve better fire ratings from the insurance industry and



Pasco County firefighter jumps into one of the new Class A pumpers to answer call.



Chairman Barry Doyle presents certificates of appreciation and plaques to volunteers from the Central and South Central firefighters associations for donations.

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SAVINGS REALIZED THROUGH MERGER

| Item | Estimated Annual Savings |
|--|--------------------------|
| Top administrative salaries* | \$ 60,000 |
| Central dispatch/telephones | 60,000 |
| Equipment† | 400,000 |
| One central training center | 36,400 |
| Bulk purchasing (Operations), based on 20% reduction | 20,000 |
| TOTAL | \$576,400 |

*Only three chiefs are needed, instead of five. Also, fewer deputy chiefs, assistant chiefs, and administrative staff are needed since merger.

†This is a one-time savings in 1980. Additional savings were realized in 1981 when lease/purchase of Class A pumpers was paid off for a savings on interest of \$30,759. A single aerial ladder truck will be purchased in 1982 for approximately \$325,000 and used throughout the county. Prior to merger, at least one other district would have had to buy an aerial ladder truck.

thereby lower fire insurance premiums for the residents.

6. To purchase capital equipment based on need rather than on ability to pay.

7. To achieve flexibility in using manpower and equipment, also based on need.

8. To provide a unified training program.

9. To simplify maintenance and upkeep of fire apparatus.

10. To provide a better working relationship among firefighters.

On December 31, 1979, the board voted to establish the Pasco County Municipal Fire Tax Unit. This effectively combined the five separate units into one single, countywide district.

Benefits of merger

The Pasco County Fire Service now covers 120 square miles and serves an estimated 108,000 people—about 80% of the total population of the unincorporated areas of Pasco County. When Highland Forest is added, those figures will increase to 175 square miles and approximately 115,000 people.

Here are some recent accomplishments made possible by the merger:

○ Handles over 3000 requests annually for firefighting or other emergency aid, saving an estimated \$24.5 million worth of property.

○ Adopted an annual budget totaling nearly \$2 million. This represents a tremendous growth over separate unit budgets, which before merger ranged from \$15,000 to \$600,000.

○ In 1980 won a better fire rating classification from the Insurance Services Office, thereby substantially reducing insurance rates for thou-

sands of residential and commercial customers. For the first time, the new rating applied to the entire district rather than to individual tax districts, each of which had previously had its own rating.

○ Won a better fire rating for the city of Port Richey, which in 1981 signed a fire service contract with the county for provision of all fire protection service within the city limits.

○ Installed a 300-foot, 30-story communications tower and new communications equipment in cooperation with other county departments to serve the entire fire district and other county functions.

○ Purchased a new 10-channel tape recorder to improve efficiency of central dispatch and allow the dispatcher to verify the caller's request and location.

○ Through cooperation with the Pasco County Utilities Department, achieved increased and better maintenance of fire hydrants, utility water pressure and reserves.

○ Implemented a color-coding system for fire hydrants.

○ Sponsors an ongoing volunteer recruitment program, which has raised firefighting strength to 36 paid firefighters and 133 volunteers.

○ Implemented a youth training program with the Boy Scouts to teach youngsters about firefighting as a career.

○ Stepped up the fire inspection program.

○ Through lease/purchase financing, added four new Class A 1000-gpm pumpers; also acquired two renovated pumpers through a State Division of Forestry program that uses prison labor to refurbish used forestry vehi-

cles, for a savings to Pasco County taxpayers of thousands of dollars.

○ Started construction of three new fire stations to serve growing areas; remodeled three existing fire stations; and added a wing to another station, which was paid for by a major developer in the area as a contribution to the community.

○ Purchased another hydraulically operated rescue tool that can extricate victims of auto accidents in 5 minutes instead of 45 minutes.

Funding

The countywide fire service is funded through a millage levied on all property owners living within the fire tax district. Prior to merger, millage rates differed. However, the county commission wanted to equalize the millage rate for all citizens within the district and allow all districts to get out of debt, thus saving interest charges for the taxpayers in the long run.

During the 1980-81 budget hearings, the commission adopted a countywide millage rate for the first time. The single mill rate was again adopted in 1981-82. An important benefit of having a uniform countywide millage rate is that it makes it possible for high-growth areas or struggling, sparsely settled areas to get the necessary equipment and capital improvements they need right away without carrying unworkable, costly debt burdens.

Both in the long and the short run, merger saves everybody money. In 1980 alone, the commission was able to save county taxpayers more than \$500,000. This was possible because the commission was able to take advantage of bulk purchasing, centralized training, flexibility in manpower and equipment, less administrative staff, and other factors. (The breakdown of these savings is shown in the table.)

In summary, the Pasco County Fire Improvement Program for 1982 shows a determined commitment to further upgrade our personnel, equipment, and capital projects and meet the needs of the public, our professional staff, and our volunteers. The commission budgeted about \$430,000 to construct our three new fire stations, and those projects are underway. As always, we will continue to foster cooperation between county, municipal, and volunteer departments. But without the support of our citizens, the business community, and our dedicated volunteer firefighters, none of this would have been possible. ■

Fire Chief, 6/82