

**BUDGETING**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In keeping with AFJ's policy of providing information on how various departments are coping with current economic conditions, this month we focus on the Santa Fe Springs and Downey (CA) fire departments, whose two chiefs put their heads together to come up with a cost-cutting, efficiency-boosting plan to combine the management of two departments.

# Combining Departments

## Two into One Makes Sense

By Robert C. Wilson, Chief  
Santa Fe Springs (CA) Fire Department  
and  
Ronald S. Irwin, Chief  
Downey (CA) Fire Department

**F**aced with the continuing recession in California and an anticipated raid on city treasuries by the state, the city council asked us, Chief Robert Wilson of the City of Santa Fe Springs and Chief Ronald Irwin of the City of Downey, to look at ways cost savings could be incurred by combining or sharing resources in our fire departments.

The two of us had a series of meetings to discuss different options that were available to us. It was soon apparent that the choices would be few. Whatever we decided on would have to meet very strict criteria as far as impacting any current MOUs with either department's labor organization and being in the best interests of the citizens of the two cities. Last, but not least, the plan had to be reasonably easy to implement, while generating significant enough savings to make it worthwhile to do so.

In order to identify functions that could possibly be shared by both cities, we investigated areas that we felt were duplicated or under-utilized. The area that showed the most promise seemed to be upper fire department management, i.e., fire chiefs, battalion chiefs and fire marshals. After reviewing the response statistics of both departments, it became clear that chief officers were the most-expensive and under-utilized positions.

Now, this is not to imply that chief officers do not earn their salaries. However, in our departments, we felt that they could be better utilized and their span of control expanded to both cities. In fact, bat-

tion chiefs in many larger departments have a much wider scope of control than both our cities combined—up to eight or more fire stations and attendant personnel per BC.

Next, we needed a determination of how many major incidents, that is, structure fires, explosions, etc. that require the presence of a BC, are typical of our cities. The City of Downey had 108 high-risk incidents in 1992, and the City of Santa Fe Springs had 43. Of Downey's 6,762 incidents for the year, and Santa Fe Springs' 3,307, medical emergencies outnumbered fires by more than two to one, and we felt that the remaining fires and other incidents could be handled by a first-in captain entirely, or at least until the arrival of a BC.

### THE PROPOSAL

#### Phase I

Our recommendation was to form a joint powers authority that would combine all of the chief officers, including fire chief and fire marshals, from the cities of Downey and Santa Fe Springs, into a fire management agency. An administering board would oversee the formation of the agency and set policy.

Under this plan, pay and benefits earned by Santa Fe Springs chief officers would be kept at their current levels. However, Downey chief officers, because of the disparity between the two wage and benefit packages, would be given a pay increase immediately to bring their wages more in line with chief

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officers in Santa Fe Springs. Later, wage and benefit packages would be brought into complete parity.

We also recommended that a wage and benefit package be established for all new employees of the joint powers agency. Through attrition, eventually all chief officers would be remunerated under the same policy.

An important part of Phase I was to use an equal number of chief officers from each city. There would still be one battalion chief per shift for the two cities. Also, the operations chief would work a shift schedule and fill in for suppression BCs when they are on leave. Two battalion chiefs would be assigned staff functions such as training and administration, on a normal work schedule. The current fire marshals of each city would be retained, with each administering a separate and independent fire prevention division in his city.

Finally, we made the decision that only one fire chief should represent both cities, as manager of the joint powers agency. We felt that, if each city maintained its own chief, it would confuse the issue of who's in charge, leading to bad management practices. This change would be facilitated by the fact that Santa Fe Springs' Chief Wilson is planning to retire soon.

#### Phase II

Phase II addressed how these new lower and more efficient manning levels would be achieved. We felt that attrition would be the best method, as it would keep demotions and layoffs to a minimum. We estimated that the optimal level would be reached in no more than two or three years in this manner.

Under Phase II, the assistant chief would take over much of the staff work that was handled by the two

staff BCs in Phase I. The suppression battalion chiefs would also be expected to carry a portion of the work vacated by the staff BCs. One fire marshal would be responsible for managing the two separate fire prevention divisions.

#### COST SAVINGS

We estimate that Phase I would produce an immediate savings over the present budgets of the two cities, even taking into account the pay increase for Downey employees. Phase II provides the greatest savings when fully implemented.

As far as future savings, we recommended that the agency explore the possibility of combining the two fire prevention divisions into one.

This combination division would allow a further reduction in personnel and sharing of expertise that would also save a substantial amount.

#### CONCLUSION

Our recommendations to the city council were made after extensive analysis of the administrative, operational and training services that both cities now offer. The conclusion we reached was that combining all of these activities into one agency makes a lot of sense. In fact, even if there were no savings, we believe this is still the most efficient way to provide fire management to both city's fire departments. ▲

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