

SF-Consolidation - Regional

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Regionalization in the Fire Service

Considerations of Consolidation of Three Communities

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ABSTRACT

In the past, the fire service has traditionally stood alone among fast changing economic, demographic, and social progress within communities. While inflation, recessions, tax levy ceilings, lack of revenue, and the Fair Labor Standards Act occur in our communities; fire departments have remained unchanged in their traditional approaches to the delivery of fire protection services.

This traditional approach has been taken by the Town of Menasha Fire Department. Over the past ten years, the Town of Menasha has sustained substantial growth in population and in residential and commercial development. Past methods of funding for the Department have brought about difficult times for the delivery of services.

In researching this topic, considerable information was obtained through the National Fire Academy's Learning Resource Center, surveys, Town of Menasha records, and personal experience. The data revealed that new and innovative thinking must be utilized and that existing resources could be better utilized. The research also found that the key to successful and sustained services for the future depends upon a cultural change upon the people who reside in the Town of Menasha, as well as the members of the various departments who would be affected.

The recommendations that have been made in this report are that many areas which are operated by this Department are duplicated by other departments in other communities. A regional approach can be used because many of the departments in other communities share the same issues and concerns and they can be solved or minimized through cooperative efforts.

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INTRODUCTION

In order for the Town of Menasha to survive as an organization and to provide quality fire protection services to its citizens, alternative methods of delivering these services must be examined. Alternatives of providing these services, while maintaining quality services, is the basis of this report.

Research materials on the regionalization of fire protection was reviewed, as well as the current method of service delivery in the Town of Menasha. The existing resources and available resources were examined to determine their impact in solving the problem. Finally, different approaches were reviewed to see how other communities have dealt with these particular problems.

During the research of this topic, it was clear that the major problem will be to influence the attitude of the various political entities and to create a positive environment to allow the members of the organizations to reach a consensus to the proposed solution. Most of the participating members must be introduced to a new and different solution that has never been previously proposed. To successfully implement regionalization, this will require effective leadership, consensus, and teamwork as exhibited throughout the Executive Officers Program.

The regionalization of services is not a new idea. Several other communities have implemented similar programs with varied degrees of success. Some of these communities include Hudson County, New Jersey; Pasco County, Florida; Costa County, California; and Anchorage, Alaska.

The Town of Menasha is a rapidly developing community located in northern Winnebago County in northeastern Wisconsin. This developing community is facing fiscal challenges and taxpayers revolts that are

confronting local government leaders, appointed and elected. (See Tables one and two)

Table 1 - Town of Menasha Population from 1970 - 1989

<u>Year</u>	<u>Population</u>
1970	8,682*
1975	9,243
1980	12,307*
1985	13,648
1988	13,909
1989	14,178

* Official 1970 and 1980 U.S. Census Bureau figures

** Wisconsin Department of Administration population estimate

Table 2 - Town of Menasha Value 1970 - 1989

<u>Year</u>	<u>Value</u>	<u>Increase in Value</u>
1970	111,773,000	Base Year
1975	169,292,700	+ 57,519,700
1980	334,803,720	+165,511,020
1985	426,927,200	+ 92,123,480
1989	508,801,150	+ 81,873,950

What has caused this rapid growth not only in the Town of Menasha but throughout communities across the Country? In 1800, only six percent of the people in the United States lived in cities. By 1980, the Census Bureau reported that 74 percent of our population was living in cities, towns, and other "urban" areas. In addition to the shift of population from rural areas to cities and towns, there is another shift occurring. This "other" shift is occurring as our national economy is restructured.

Manufacturing companies must be located near adequate supplies of labor, water, and raw materials such as coal, and near transportation centers. Other factors that attract manufacturing to cities and towns are climate, education systems, cultural attractiveness and availability of recreational areas. The results of the shifts of population and manufacturing has caused a demand for more and better services and a demand for a ceiling on these costs. These demands from the public have local leaders refocusing their efforts in how they approach the delivery of these services.

The concept of consolidation or merging of municipal fire departments or fire protection districts is not new. It has been successfully implemented in Dade County, Florida; the Jacksonville/Duval County, Florida merger; the Pasco County, Florida merger; and Fort Collins/Poudre Valley Fire District merger in Colorado. Previous research, and in selected instances, implementation of consolidation has shown that it offers advantages in operating efficiently, economies of scale, and administration of public resources.

Therefore, this paper will address the issue of consolidation or merging with other communities. The terms "regionalization", "consolidation", or "merger" are synonymous and are used interchangeably throughout this report. The paper will focus on the three (3) key areas: Resistance to Change, Advantages of Consolidation, and Managing Change.

Resistance to Change

When discussing the merging of fire departments, especially paid and combination, we are pushing against a very real psychological

inertia, man's resistance to change. People are creatures of habit, we don't like to change our comfortable ways of doing things, even when someone we trust promises us the new way to do things will be better.¹ When discussing the consolidation or merging of fire departments, many questions and fears arise. Some of the fears which I have identified are (1) fear of job security, (2) ownership or individuality of cities, towns, etc., (3) loss of control by communities, (4) image or public perception of the organization.

To begin to look at these and other issues when considering consolidation or merging, an independent advisory committee should be formulated. The use of an advisory committee begins to break down resistance due to change in the community because it serves as a source independent of the agencies involved through which information regarding fire consolidation can be considered and then presented to the public.²

It is important to remember that when assembling such an advisory committee, that members be appointed representing each of the major forces that will or may be affected by the consolidation or merger.

It has been my experience that when discussing a merger with political entities, that it is always assumed that a reduction of fire fighters will result. This is not always the case because of several factors. Getting the various communities to buy into the merger will almost always result in the preservation of jobs by community leaders and by the various unions that are represented. The geographics of the areas may not allow a reduction in personnel to occur because of existing natural or manmade barriers such as lakes, rivers, expressways, or existing access to remote areas. Any cost savings that may result in

the reduction of personnel may be offset by increases in salaries and benefits of smaller communities or departments that are integrated into the larger merger.

Ownership by department's members and the community is a very real factor that must be dealt with. The National Fire Protection Handbook says that "fire departments are representation of the local communities that supports them". With this in mind, each community views the fire department as "its" fire department and expects it to represent the ideals of the community and to provide the level of fire protection acceptable to the expectations of the community and to be cost effective in the delivery of these services.³ Many political entities also view their department as "their own" because they provide funding and have limited control over the operation of the department. Many of the smaller communities and smaller combination or volunteer departments have a very strong sense of pride and tradition. This pride, tradition, and general sense of ownership can be real impediments to bringing about a merger of departments.

Closely related to loss of identity is the sense of "loss of control" by the local governments. They are very unwilling to give up any actual or perceived control or input which they have towards their departments. Not having any say into how, or what, the department does creates great anxiety in elected officials. When budget issues arise, they feel like they are issuing a blank check because there is no feedback as to what is being done for their community relative to fire protection.

The primary disadvantage of consolidation is the perceived loss of local control, and this has been the reason why consolidation is frequently opposed by individual departments, as well as by local politicians.⁴

While discussing the possible merging of a combination department and a career department, a local union president responded, "Would we still be considered a professional department?" How department members, political bodies, and the general public perceive the local department and the level of service is an important factor. Several years ago the City of Oconto, Wisconsin put to referendum the proposal to change their career department to volunteer. The referendum was defeated based upon the perception of untrained volunteers as to career fire fighters.

Perception of the organization by members, politicians, and general public must be professional if the merger is to be successful.

Advantages of Consolidation

There are many advantages of consolidation or the merging two or more departments into one.

Regional consolidation provides the potential advantages of (1) centralizing fire department management and reducing administrative costs, (2) centralizing the dispatching and communication network and other fire department support services, such as maintenance and training, (3) improving fire service capabilities because of increased resources and specialized equipment, (4) unifying fire prevention codes, and in some cases (5) reducing insurance premiums because of improvements in the I.S.O. ratings.⁵

Reorganization of existing resources such as administrative personnel, equipment, communications, and fire prevention codes combined with an expanded tax base will translate to savings of tax money and increased productivity.

On April 14, 1988, a report was issued to Winnebago County, Wisconsin Executive Paul Stevenson concerning the consolidation of two (2) 911 emergency centers into one. All communications and dispatching for all career, combination, and volunteer departments will be consolidated into one (1) 911 center. The first five years of operation will result in an operating cost savings of \$684,878.00, including a three percent increase per year, which does not include miscellaneous operating costs.⁶

This documentation provides sound evidence of the cost savings that are possible with consolidations or mergers.

A survey of the Town of Menasha, City of Menasha, and City of Neenah Fire Departments found a total of eleven engine companies, three ladder or truck companies, one squad, one air support unit and four fire prevention/command cars. (See Table 3) These three communities have a combined population base of 53,029 with a combined square mileage of 25.84.

Table Four shows the resources of a community that would be of comparable size. Under a consolidation of the three communities, you can see by this example the cost savings in the purchase of major pieces of fire apparatus. Again, this would translate to tax savings for the citizens of these communities with regard to purchasing of future

apparatus. Strategic location of this equipment would also provide better coverage and reduced response times.

Town of Menasha

4	Engine Companies	14,178 population
1	Truck Company	
1	Air Support Unit	
2	Fire Prevention/Command Cars	
12.5	Square Miles Served	

City of Menasha

3	Engine Companies	14,852 population
1	Truck Company	
1	Command Car	
5.74	Square Miles Served	

City of Neenah

4	Engine Companies	23,999 population
1	Truck Company	
1	Squad	
1	Fire Prevention Car	
7.6	Square Miles Served	

TOTAL

11	Engine Companies	53,029 population
3	Truck Companies	
1	Air Support Unit	
4	Fire Prevention/Command Cars	
1	Squad	
25.84	Square Miles Served	

Table 3 - Resources Available for Proposed Consolidation of Communities

City of Appleton

6	Engine Companies	65,318 population
2	Truck Companies	
4	Fire Prevention/Command Cars	
17.7	Square Miles Served	

Table 4 - Current Resources for the Appleton, Wisconsin Fire Department

Between these three communities there are a total of nine people employed in the administration of the departments. Administrative personnel could be reassigned to provide improved management in all phases of departments such as fire suppression, training, fire prevention, or support services. Further analysis could be done in other areas to provide better productivity, management, and accountability.

Managing Change

Implementing the change process of consolidation will be the most challenging phase of the entire process. As briefly discussed earlier, an advisory committee should be established utilizing people who will be effected by the consolidation. This advisory committee can serve in a variety of fashions. They can serve as (1) innovators, who brainstorm approaches to serious conflicts effecting the change process, (2) "Gospel bearers" who actively promote positive change, and (3) "flack catchers" for emotional reactions that will take place among those who perceive change as a threat.

Another important matter is the term which we use for the process. Don't use the word "consolidation" which has the connotation of "takeover" advises Chief Bullock of Metropolitan Dade County. Rather, use the word "merger" he urges.⁷

Prior to the consolidation effort, you must be sure that you know what it will require to provide fire protection under the new arrangements. Implementing change will require constant communication with political leaders, fire officials, union representatives, and key public figures if the consolidation is to be a success. Change will be a slow process to implement.

Change, however, can be positive if it results in better fire protection at a lower cost. The results of this report clearly indicate that the consolidation or merger of fire departments is available for cost-effective fire protection for communities facing the fiscal challenges of today and tomorrow.

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