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Grounds for consolidation

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Regional
Consolidation - Regional

The 1980s present many challenges to public fire protection managers. Almost always, the greatest challenge that must be faced involves money.

Today the fire service is confronted with numerous economic problems. Undoubtedly, Proposition 13 in California, Proposition 2 1/2 in Massachusetts, and other major tax revolts are contributors to these problems. The strongest revolt is coming from the overtaxed property owner. Property taxes continue to increase at an alarming rate each year. This problem is not unique to any one area, but is prevalent in all regions of the United States.

The fire service traditionally has solved its problems by increasing its budget, but now, as communities cut budgets, fire service managers are faced with the dilemma of trying to do more with less. Budget cuts often mean closed stations, personnel layoffs, or deactivated companies. One option that has been available for years, but until recently was adopted by only a few departments, is regional consolidation. Regional consolidation of fire services is a viable option allowing communities to maintain an acceptable level of protection despite budget reductions.

Regional consolidation removes the fire protection responsibility from the individual local government to towns, communities, and cities, who join together to provide unified fire service delivery.¹ This management option will allow many small municipalities to enjoy the benefits of one large department, and would result in significant monetary savings. The consolidation described here pertains only to the fire service.

Advantages

Regional consolidation has several distinct advantages. The first is a broader tax base; the cost of the department is spread out over a larger area, allowing the fire service to be less of a financial burden on an individual municipality. This sharing also blunts the impact of local politics on fire department operations.

A second major advantage is the elimination or reduction of overlapping and duplicative services.² This area can be divided into several separate groups:

1. Administration — Only one fire service manager (chief) is required, along with one clerical staff housed in a central location. The number of deputy chiefs (administrative and line) also would be greatly reduced.
2. Communications — Communications would be housed in a central location, dispatching all apparatus on a common radio frequency. This would improve response time because the closest company would be dispatched, regardless of what city it is in. In addition, only one fire alarm division would be required for the area.
3. Fire prevention — Unification of fire prevention codes and fire prevention programs will allow for a more efficient program operated by better qualified people. Fire prevention personnel also will have the expertise to provide the associated technical services, an area often lacking in local departments.
4. Fire service training — Centralized training will

promote uniform training. Better qualified instructors will lead to better and more thoroughly trained personnel. Improved training facilities will enable the training staff to provide varied and more complete training.

5. Maintenance — Only one centralized maintenance shop is required. This can be staffed by the best mechanics from each community.

Because the fire service manager can draw people from the entire region, better qualified personnel will be available for almost every aspect of operations.

Another advantage to consolidation may be the possible elimination of one or more fire companies, without a reduction of overall effectiveness. And, properly accomplished, consolidation may have a positive impact on the Insurance Services Office (ISO) grading for the consolidated district.³

Consolidation also would improve the region's ability to respond to large incidents because the consolidated fire department would have more resources and specialized equipment than any one individual department.⁴

In addition, supplemental fire units for additional alarms can be supplied rapidly to a central staging area, avoiding the time lags that can occur with mutual aid.⁵

Problems

In contemplating a regional form of fire protection delivery, consider what the fire service manager must contend with when he elects to stay with the restrictive, traditional structure of the local fire department:

1. The available financial resources of the local government simply may not be adequate to support the desired levels of fire protection;
2. Indirectly related to finance is the inability to provide viable fire prevention maintenance, or public relations programs, or to meet data processing needs;
3. Manpower and equipment resources may be totally inadequate for a serious fire;
4. The talent required for the efficient and effective management, administration, and operation of the fire department simply may not be available.⁶

What size for consolidation?

Many people think regional consolidation involves a large geographical area, such as a county. A few county departments already exist in the United States. One of the largest and most renowned is in Los Angeles County, California. Other successful county-wide departments include: Baltimore, Anne Arundel, Montgomery, and Prince George's counties in Maryland; Prince William, Chesterfield, Henrico, Fairfax, and Arlington counties in Virginia; and Wyoming County in New York.

Regional consolidation could involve an area as large as a county, as small as two contiguous towns, or several fire districts within the same town. The geographical composition of a given area will dictate the most beneficial size of a regional department. Regardless of the size, the advantages remain the same.

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Total consolidation is not the only possibility. A more popular form is limited or partial consolidation. Most fire service managers would support limited consolidation because they retain control of their respective departments. Many such agreements already are in effect around the country. Consolidation of dispatching/communications is one of the most common forms, and another is a central emergency medical service. One town ambulance will serve an entire region, usually composed of smaller towns.

Other possibilities include the joint purchase of portable cascades, foam units, ladder trucks, and tankers. This arrangement enables several towns to share funding for the equipment, which would be housed in a central location, thus serving the entire region. Attempting to purchase the necessary equipment separately would result in expending astronomical sums of money. The end result would be that some areas would not have the necessary equipment. These days of fiscal restraint are not the time to go it alone, nor is it logical for small departments to try to purchase specialized equipment for the "big one."

Adopting the consolidation concept will be difficult for most fire departments. The transition period will be especially difficult. Opposition can be anticipated from within the fire service as well as from local politicians.

Local politicians see the consolidation effort as a threat to their empire; many are concerned only with political boundaries. The voters, too, have not been receptive to consolidation of the fire service.⁷

Local fire chiefs and individual communities may be opposed because they will lose direct control of the fire department. Opposition also may center around the possible elimination of some jobs. The argument will be made

that, for the past 100 years, fire department operations have worked from a local perspective. However, what worked before will not necessarily continue forever. Leave the past and prepare to enter the 21st century.

Conclusion

The concept of regional consolidation merits considerable thought. Consolidation offers significant advantages to those communities affected by budget restraints. To manage with less, instead of attempting to solve the money dilemma, can lead only to the demise of the fire department.

With increasing taxes, soaring inflation, and the poor overall state of the economy, local money problems probably will be prevalent for a long time. The time to plan is now, before budget cuts force a reduction or curtailment of services. An effective consolidation plan can ensure that adequate protection will be maintained. ❁

Footnotes

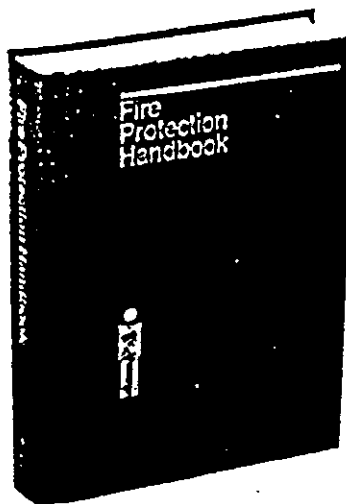
1. *Managing Fire Services*, International City Management Association, Washington, DC, 1979, p. 52.
2. William E. Clark, "Advantages of a County Fire Department," *Fire Engineering* 121 (December, 1968):38.
3. Swersey, Ignall et. al., "Fire Protection and Local Government: An Evaluation of Policy-Related Research," New York City-Rand Institute Report R-1813-NSF (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1975) p. 4.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
5. *Managing Fire Services*, International City Management Association, p. 52.
6. Harry E. Hickey, *Public Fire Safety Organization: A Systems Approach*, (Boston, National Fire Protection Association) 1973, p. 41.
7. Swersey, Ignall et. al., "Fire Protection and Local Government," p. 16.

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