

# Exploration and Discussion of a Joint Fire District

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# Introduction

Fire departments in towns, villages and cities are exploring new ways to improve the delivery of fire protection services. Consolidation, through shared services or combining jurisdictions, can increase the efficiency and effectiveness of departments by allowing for the better use of resources and providing greater flexibility and capability. Consolidation may also result in cost savings due to the efficient use of resources and the reduction of duplicative efforts through reorganization.

While the concept of consolidation is not new, few fire departments have taken advantage of its benefits. Faced with increased costs and budgetary constraints, fire departments should consider consolidation or cooperating/joining services as a way to stabilize or reduce fire protection costs.

# Introduction

The driving force behind all decisions during the consolidation process should be the question:

**“What is in the public’s best interest?”**



# Introduction

Fire departments should consider consolidation when any of the following **factors** are present:

- Fire protection services exist immediately adjacent to one another, each with a complete, and many times, duplicated set of resources, including apparatus, equipment, facilities, and staffing;
- Increasing demands at all levels of government for funding of essential services;
- Insufficient career staff or difficulty recruiting and retaining staff;
- Increasing service requirements, including hazardous materials, technical rescue, emergency medical services, and terrorism and natural disaster preparedness.

# What is the difference between a fire districts and a fire protection district?

A **fire district** is a political subdivision located within a jurisdiction. Fire districts are established for the purpose of providing fire protection and response to emergencies. A fire district is political entity with an elected governing body, administrative officers, and expenditure limitations. A fire district is dependent on the jurisdiction(s) means to its initial creation, extension and dissolution. A fire district has the power both to incur indebtedness and to require the levy of taxes. Fire district taxes are assessed, levied, and collected at the same time and in the same manner as town taxes.

# What is the difference between a fire districts and a fire protection district?

A **fire protection district** is a geographical area of a town which is provided fire protection pursuant to contract with any city, village, fire district or incorporated fire company. It is an assessment area within which a jurisdiction can provide limited services and assess the cost back against the taxable properties within the district. A jurisdictional board can create a fire protection district, consolidate adjoining fire protection districts, alter the boundaries of a fire protection district, or dissolve a fire protection district on its own motion or by petition.

# Ohio Revised Code

## **ORC 505.371 Joint fire district creation.**

The boards of township trustees of one or more townships and the legislative authorities of one or more municipal corporations, or the legislative authorities of two or more municipal corporations, or the boards of township trustees of two or more townships, may, by adoption of a joint resolution by a majority of the members of each board of township trustees and by a majority of the members of the legislative authority of each municipal corporation, create a joint fire district comprising the municipal corporations and all or any portions of the townships as are mutually agreed upon.

A joint fire district so created shall be given a name different from the name of any participating township or municipal corporation.

# Ohio Revised Code

## ORC 505.371 Joint fire district creation (CONT.)

The governing body of the joint fire district shall be a board of fire district trustees, which shall include one representative from each board of township trustees and one representative from the legislative authority of each municipal corporation in the district.

The board of fire district trustees may exercise the same powers as are granted to a board of township trustees in sections 505.37 to 505.45 of the Revised Code, including, but not limited to, the power to levy a tax upon all taxable property in the fire district as provided in section 505.39 of the Revised Code. The board of fire district trustees may establish reasonable charges for the use of ambulance or emergency medical services.

# Ohio Revised Code

## **505.375 Fire and ambulance district creation.**

The board of trustees of a joint ambulance district created under section 505.71 of the Revised Code and the board of fire district trustees of a joint fire district created under section 505.371 of the Revised Code may negotiate to combine their two joint districts into a single fire and ambulance district for the delivery of both fire and ambulance services, if the geographic area covered by the combining joint districts is exactly the same.

Both boards shall adopt a joint resolution ratifying the agreement and setting a date on which the fire and ambulance district shall come into being.

# Not-For-Profit Fire Corporations

A fire corporation is a special not-for-profit corporation formed to provide fire protection to a fire district, fire protection district or village under contract with the governing body (board of fire commissioners, town board, or village board of trustees). Fire corporations are under the control of the city, village, fire district or town authorities having control over fire protection in such areas.



## **Not-For-Profit Fire Corporation Example**

The Loveland-Symmes Fire Department, Clermont County, Ohio, is a private fire company that is governed by a Board of Directors. The Board of Directors meet monthly to discuss issues pertaining to the fire department and make decisions that help guide the organization in maintaining the high quality of service that our citizens have come to expect and deserve. The Board of Directors consists of the Chief of Department, the Assistant Fire Chief, two citizens appointed by the Symmes Township Board of Trustees, one citizen appointed by the City of Loveland, and one honorary fire department member.



# Weighing the Options...

Consolidation should involve **open and straightforward communication** with all stakeholders. Interested fire entities and municipalities must review the needs, options, challenges, problems, advantages, negative aspects and expenses involved with consolidation.

Successful cooperative efforts may lead to increased efficiency, improved effectiveness, enhanced or expanded services, reduced costs, cost avoidance, coordination of regional planning, elimination of artificial boundaries, and standardization of services and programs.



# Weighing the Options Example

## A Seamless Merger: Kansas Cities Expand Capacity of Fire Services

**“It was meant to be and the time was right.”**

The merger of the fire departments of Merriam and Overland Park, two close-in suburbs on the Kansas side of the Kansas City region, would lead to enhanced community service and **more than \$1.5 million in savings overtime.**



# Weighing the Options Example

## A Seamless Merger: Kansas Cities Expand Capacity of Fire Services

Overland Park needed additional coverage in parts of the city, and Merriam wanted to enhance its advanced life support (ALS) capabilities to be more efficient when responding to an increase in medical calls. Merriam's proximity would solve Overland Park's problem, and Overland Park's extensive ALS capabilities would help Merriam address its needs (ICMA, 2016).



\* Adapted by TownMap of ICMA

# Consolidation Advantages...



- Improving response time;
- Maximizing purchasing power;
- Availability of career and volunteer members;
- Centralizing fire department management and reducing administrative costs;
- Centralizing the dispatching and communication network and other fire department support systems;
- Standardizing procedures for operation and training;
- Reducing the community's insurance premiums based on improvements in the insurance rating;
- Improving fleet management, such as having one central repair and maintenance facility for vehicles and apparatus; and
- Savings to taxpayers.



# Consolidation Disadvantages...

When considering the option to consolidate, the advantages must be balanced against the possible disadvantages of engaging in a cooperative process. Possible negative aspects of consolidation revolve around the process itself, specifically:

- Perceived loss of local control;
- Opposition by local politicians;
- Differences in union contracts - wages, benefits;
- Turf wars;
- Reduced number of fire commissioners;
- Loss of membership;
- Perception that consolidation is being used as a way to eliminate positions.



## Consolidation Concerns...

Further, one of the main concerns with consolidation is whether cooperating fire entities will be able to cope with **underlying cultural issues**, such as the color of the fire apparatus, the name on the fire stations, and the **name of the organization** on the side of the fire engine. Additional issues such as training standards and familiar operational procedures can also impede support for consolidation.

These cultural issues must be confronted **honestly** in order to ensure a successful consolidation.



# S. T. E. P. Litmus Test

Fire service organizations customarily function along a paramilitary model. This is especially important during times of delivering emergency services. The National Incident Management System (NIMS) standard of care supports this model while working in the field.



I address issues systematically through a four-tier analysis (the STEP litmus test) which asks, is the issue **socially** acceptable for the internal and external customer? Is the issue **technically** oriented for our situation? Are **economics** a consideration and funds available? Finally, is the issue **politically** aligned?

# So, Where Do You Go From Here?

You cannot measure a program without first clearly identifying the goals and purpose of that program, in other words the intended outcome. Goal statements are **qualitative** statements that typically generalize the intended outcome of a program in words rather than numbers.

This is the first step to **evaluating performance**.

Once intended goals are established, the department must identify the functions or actions that are taken in order to achieve said goal.



## So, Where Do You Go From Here?

They must also consider available resources - whether monetary, equipment, or person-hours. The Fire and Emergency Service Self-Assessment Manual, by the Center for **Public Safety Excellence and Commission on Fire Accreditation International** is a good example of how to create goals statements and measure the achievement of those goals.



# So, Where Do You Go From Here?

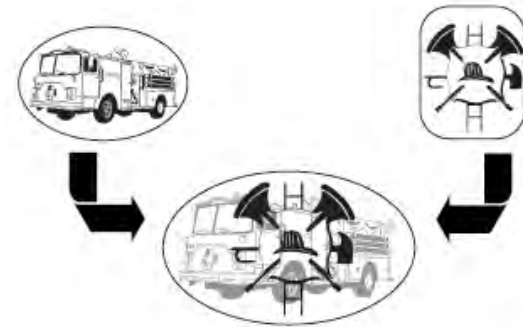
An additional resource comes from the

**Volunteer Fire Insurance Service.**

Fire officials find themselves considering a consolidation or merger for different reasons. In many instances, state constitutions and laws even encourage local jurisdictions to undertake such efforts to make the most effective and efficient use of their resources.

## Fire Department Consolidation

**Why & How To Do It ... Right**



# Consolidation Considerations

Consolidation can be a viable option which should be looked upon as a beneficial alternative to enable improved use of scarce resources, flexibility of staff, equipment and dollars, stronger internal programs, and increased opportunities to expand services and/or specialize. It works to overcome political boundary issues, ensuring that the closest unit responds in an emergency and creating more rational protection service areas and faster response times.

**Maybe – but not in all circumstances.**

# Consolidation Considerations...

Obviously, the issues concerning a joint fire district, consolidation or collaboration remain complex and somewhat unique to each jurisdiction. Elected officials are interested in finding ways to deliver fire and emergency-medical service to a local community, and this makes consolidation a hot topic.



Elected officials, especially those newly elected, may be interested in your opinions and want your input on these critical issues before forming an opinion. No doubt, the best way to dismiss the myths and plan for your department's future is to be an **active participant** in these discussions.

# The Lake County, Ohio Process

From this process, you can then begin to **research** all of the variables and come to a conclusion.

## Consolidation of the Lake County Fire & EMS Departments Feasibility Study



2015

# Lake County, Ohio Fire & EMS Feasibility Study

The Consolidation of Lake County Fire Departments Feasibility Study grant project, which was funded by the **State of Ohio Local Government Innovation Fund** (LGIF) Program, tests the feasibility of consolidation of the 14 municipal Fire Departments and the 2 Fire District into a single (or up to 3) consolidated Fire Districts to improve services at reduced cost.

It is also to explore if a **partnership of shared** fire department services and equipment will result in efficiencies that reduce the overall cost while maintaining or improving services.



# Lake County, Ohio Fire & EMS Feasibility Study

The following **assumptions** were made going into the study:

- The study gathered various items related to each departments' operations, level of service and response time, no evaluation of each individual's departments effectiveness was determine;
- It was assumed that each community had determined that the current level of service and its manpower level currently being provided was acceptable;
- It was assumed that changes to administrative structure would not immediately affect the level of service each community currently provided;
- Station locations were not analyzed but assumed to be appropriate to continue each communities same level of service.

# Lake County, Ohio Fire & EMS Feasibility Study

## Conclusion

The Lake County Fire Departments are currently operating at an **efficient and effective** level of service. They have creatively implemented staffing formats that use part-time personnel to maintain their communities requested level of service in a cost efficient method.

They have also developed a significant network of formal and informal shared services, which permit every department to meets the safety needs of their communities.



## Other Considerations in Combination Services

The Colerain Township Department of Fire and Emergency Medical Services, Hamilton County, Ohio has earned a **Class 1** Public Protection Classification rating by the Insurance Services Office, an organization that independently evaluates fire services across the country.



# Other Considerations in Combination Services

Colerain Township Department of Fire & EMS is a **Combination** career and paid part-time firefighter / paramedics that consists of dedicated men and women. When needed, they daily provide the highest quality service in a caring and professional manner.



## Considering Next Steps...

- Conduct a honest discussion between the elected officials, the firefighter / paramedics and the public.
- Each stakeholder must express their opinions.
- Is this a need or a want?
- Do not “Jump” into a process unless all stakeholders can see the **BENEFITS!**
- Consider extensive research to assist in your decision making process.

**Questions, Comments, Concerns...**



I appreciate this opportunity and hope that this overview is helpful in your decision making process.

Dr. Bernard W. Becker III



**Cleveland State University / Center for Emergency Preparedness  
Leaders in Ohio's Emergency Preparedness for over 30 years!**