

**CONSOLIDATION OF FIRE PROTECTION SERVICES IN CENTRAL
PENOBSCOT COUNTY**

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE

BY: James L. Ellis
Holden Fire/Rescue Department
Holden, Maine

An applied research project submitted to the National Fire Academy
as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program

August 2000

ABSTRACT

The problem was identified that many small communities in central Penobscot County Maine are having difficulty providing the level of fire and emergency medical services demanded by the public. The purpose of this applied research project was to explore if consolidation of fire protection agencies could improve the delivery and efficiency of fire and emergency medical services in central Penobscot County. The descriptive research methodology was used to answer the following questions:

Question 1. What are the benefits of consolidating fire protection agencies?

Questions 2. How have other governmental agencies consolidated fire protection services?

Questions 3. Are local municipal officials in central Penobscot County receptive to the consolidation of fire protection services?

The procedures in this research included selecting the communities and their respective fire departments to be studied, which were the fourteen cities and towns in central Penobscot County. A literature review of fire department consolidations, mergers and regionalization efforts was conducted to examine the benefits, limitations and challenges facing fire protection agency consolidation. A survey was conducted of local municipal officials, including town managers and local fire chiefs from the fourteen communities to determine whether they are receptive to consolidation and what concerns they would have with consolidation of fire protection services.

The results of this research determined that there are many benefits to be derived from consolidation of fire protection services between the fourteen communities in central Penobscot County. Benefits would include a more efficient allocation of

personnel, increased service levels, standardized training of fire and EMS personnel, improved dispatching and communication, improved ISO rating, better fire prevention and public education programs and more career opportunities. Communities may benefit from increased service levels for the same dollars spent or even realize cost savings by sharing administrative functions, training facilities, participating in a fleet maintenance program, eliminating the cost of some apparatus replacement and reducing other expenses through volume purchasing. Even with the potential benefits there are significant challenges with any consolidation effort. The fear of losing local control coupled with the fear of higher, uncontrollable, operating costs are serious concerns. These concerns, as well as others, must be properly addressed if partial or complete consolidation between fire protection and emergency medical services is to be successful.

Recommendations include increasing functional consolidation between the fire protection agencies in central Penobscot County. Functional consolidation includes automatic mutual aid response and combined training activities. While there is strong resistance to complete consolidation among local municipal leaders, at this time there is support for functional consolidation. If functional consolidation takes place the public will immediately benefit from faster response times and a more efficient allocation of personnel and equipment thus the foundation will be cast for a greater consolidation effort.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ABSTRACT	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS	4
INTRODUCTION	5
BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE	7
LITERATURE REVIEW	10
PROCEDURES	17
RESULTS	19
DISCUSSION	25
RECOMMENDATIONS	30
REFERENCES	32
APPENDIX A: (Consolidation Survey)	35
APPENDIX B: (Survey Results)	39

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the arrival of colonists in Virginia, in the early 1600's, Americans have banded together, neighbor helping neighbor, to provide fire protection. As the first volunteer fire companies were formed in the 1700's communities depended on help from other communities during times of crisis. Even today the key issues facing municipal fire departments are staffing, response times and the ability to handle large fires or multiple calls within the local system. The answers to addressing these key issues typically take the form of mutual aid and automatic aid agreements with neighboring jurisdictions (Jensen, 2000). Many communities across the country have even consolidated fire protection, and more recently emergency medical services, in an effort to provide better service and to promote economic efficiency. "This century will present the American fire service with its greatest challenge ever. Some will face this as a problem, while others will see it as an opportunity" (Rule, 1992, p.33).

The problem is that many small communities in central Penobscot County Maine are having difficulty providing the level of fire and emergency medical services demanded by the public. Central Penobscot County is comprised of fourteen cities and towns covering approximately 400 square miles and has a population of about 87,500 people. Thirteen municipal fire departments protect the residents of the fourteen communities. Consolidation of fire protection and emergency medical services has been discussed in great detail, however, little or no action has resulted despite the fact that "if the average citizen, taxpayer, was aware of the duplication and high cost of fire service, they would be pushing for consolidation" (Lahaie, 1994, p.15).

The purpose of this applied research project is to explore if consolidation of fire protection agencies could improve the delivery and efficiency of fire and emergency medical services in central Penobscot County. This research project employed the descriptive research methodology to answer the following questions:

Question 1. What are the benefits of consolidating fire protection and emergency medical service agencies?

Questions 2. How have other governmental agencies consolidated fire protection and emergency medical services?

Questions 3. Are local municipal officials in central Penobscot County receptive to the consolidation of fire protection and emergency medical services?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

As we enter the twenty-first century “traditional methods of providing fire and life safety services to communities are being replaced with innovative service delivery methods. One of the most common methods utilized is regional consolidation” (Boomgaarden, 1996). The Cities of Bangor, Brewer, Old Town and the Town of Orono are centrally located along the Penobscot River, and are surrounded by the towns of Bradley, Clifton, Eddington, Glenburn, Hampden, Hermon, Holden, Milford, Orrington and Veazie. The City of Bangor has the only full-time career fire department while nine combination and three volunteer fire departments serve the other fourteen communities of central Penobscot County. Approximately 158 career and 270 paid-call or volunteer

firefighters protect the 87,500 residents of the regions. Between the thirteen fire departments there are 33 engines, 8 tankers, 5 aerials, 7 rescues, 10 ambulances and 14 other pieces of apparatus, consisting mainly of brush trucks. Emergency medical services are provided at some level by all thirteen departments. Bangor, Brewer, Old Town, Orono and Glenburn provide ambulance service to their communities while the other non-transporting fire departments contract either with a neighboring fire department or a local private ambulance company. The combined budget for fire protection and emergency medical services of the fourteen communities in the region is approximately \$10.2 million dollars per year. While mutual-aid and more recently automatic mutual-aid agreements exist between many of the communities the fire departments within central Penobscot County essentially operate independently.

The communities of central Penobscot County have struggled over the years to provide adequate manpower, equipment and other resources to combat dangerous fires in their communities. More recently, expanding communities and a shift toward providing emergency medical services has increased the strain placed on these small departments. Volunteers now have fewer hours to devote to community service and small communities with limited development struggle to maintain reasonable property tax rates. The larger communities, particularly those with career fire and EMS personnel, have adjusted better to the increase demand for services, but are also feeling the same financial challenges as the smaller communities.

Within the past four years ten of the fourteen communities have relocated their dispatching to the Penobscot County Regional Communications Center, located in Bangor. This facility, which is operated by the county, provides dispatching services to

law enforcement, fire protection and emergency medical services in Penobscot County. This has been the first and only major step towards consolidation in the region. Many of the communities whom had previously provided their own dispatching services, including Brewer, Hampden and Orono realized substantial and immediate savings through the elimination of dispatcher positions.

As the demands for service continue to increase and financial resources are challenged communities and fire service agencies are looking for innovative solutions to provide better service to the customer at the same or lesser cost. As our ancestors did in the 1700's fire service agencies today are looking to their neighbors for help to meet these fire protection and emergency medical service challenges.

“Consolidation efforts among fire service agencies is nothing new. While there has been a great deal of interest in this subject in other parts of the country, New England has experienced a growth of fire departments and not consolidation” (Lahaie, 1994). The parochial nature of New England and the history of rivalry within the fire service have made consolidation efforts difficult. Communities who consider consolidation must closely evaluate their environment. “A completely hostile environment between agencies will not be easy to overcome, and the stress caused will make the job even more difficult” (Hagstrom, 1999).

A consolidation study was conducted in 1996 to evaluate a “range of cooperative alternatives for the Bangor, Brewer, Old Town and Orono Fire Departments” (Emergency Services Consulting Group, 1996). These departments represent the four largest communities within central Penobscot County. The report further identified “functional and operational consolidation and merger alternatives, recommendations, and

an implementation plan” (1996). The report recommended “the jurisdictions enter into a series of functional agreements as a first step designed to improve operational procedures and consistency between departments” (1996). As of this date no functional agreements between the communities have been made, nor have any of the recommendations been implemented.

In November of 1999 the City of Brewer and the Towns of Eddington and Holden entered into a formal functional agreement which established automatic mutual-aid as well as monthly combined training between the departments and quarterly combined officers meetings. This is the first formal functional agreement between fire departments in central Penobscot County.

“If the fire service is going to survive the challenges it is facing today, it is possible that a complete renovation of fire department structure is necessary” (Haney, 1998). Short of complete renovation, fire departments within central Penobscot County must be open and receptive to change in order to better serve their customers. “The goal of the fire service should be to safely provide the maximum amount of service to the population served at the lowest possible cost” (1998).

This applied research project was completed in accordance with the applied research requirements of the National Fire Academy’s Executive Fire Officer Program. The problem addressed by this project related specifically to Module 4: Leading Change Using the Change Management Model, as presented in the Strategic Management of Change course. Because consolidation is a cultural change, good leadership and management tools are critical for success. “The systematic change management process

becomes even more important when the focus shifts from managing change to introducing and leading a truly visionary change” (FEMA, 1996).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for this project provided key insights into various factors that affect the consolidation of fire and emergency medical services and focused on three questions: (1) What are the benefits of consolidating fire protection agencies? (2) How have other governmental agencies consolidated fire protection services? (3) Are local municipal officials in central Penobscot County receptive to the consolidation of fire protection services? These three topics were researched primarily through reviewing published documents at the National Emergency Training Center Resource Center in Emmitsburg, Maryland, at the Bangor Public Library in Bangor, Maine and from the author’s personal library. The third question was also researched by conducting a survey of the fire chiefs and city and town managers from the fourteen communities in central Penobscot County. The fire chiefs and managers provided not only demographic and departmental information, but also shared their perspective and concerns related to consolidation of fire protection and emergency medical services.

1. What are the benefits of consolidating fire protection agencies?

Consolidations and mergers are often driven by local community leaders primarily in an effort to save money. Sherman Lahaie (1994) evaluated fire protection agencies in central Penobscot County and reported “the decision to consolidate today is based upon economics as well as demands for higher levels of service in a sprawling

suburban America” (p.1). Lahaie also found that regional consolidations provide more appropriate manpower distribution, improved Insurance Service Office (ISO) rating, improved supervision, the development of common philosophical and operational standards and the better use of volunteer and paid on-call fire company personnel and equipment (Lahaie, 1994).

In their 1996 study of the four largest fire departments in central Penobscot County Emergency Services Consulting Group reported “the principal benefits of a regional approach to fire protection are reduced costs, increased effectiveness and efficiency in service delivery” (p.1). This result was supported by Jennifer Hagstrom who concluded “most reasons to consolidate fall into two categories – service and money” (Hagstrom, 1999).

“Savings generated by consolidation usually occur in two areas – capital outlay and human resources. Capital outlay savings can be significant, but tend to be only one-time or occasional. Human resources can be long term. Much of the time, consolidating only two agencies will not result in great economies of scale in human resources. Usually the savings will be in improved service and periodic capital outlay savings” (Hagstrom, 1999). Hagstrom’s research also supported the research of Charles Rule who concluded “consolidation’s cost savings come primarily on the capital side, not from the personnel side” (Rule, 1992). Rule identified many potential benefits from consolidation including central dispatch facilities, lower apparatus replacement costs, enhanced career opportunities, joint training facilities, specialization of various functions such as training and fire prevention, improved ISO rating, volume purchasing, fewer fire stations, faster response times, more efficient allocation of personnel (Rule, 1992,p.34).

In 1995 the City of Thornton, Colorado merged with the West Adams County Fire Protection District. The 180,000 residents of Thornton realized enhanced fire and emergency medical services at a savings of \$300,000 to \$500,000 per year beginning in 1996 (Colorado Public Safety, 1995). The real benefit of the merger is that the city and the county have the ability to redirect the savings realized to other services, while improving the efficiency of existing resources (p. 1).

A number of specific functions are often considered for consolidation in an effort to provide cost savings and improve service delivery. “Regional consolidation can serve to eliminate costly duplication and overlapping” (Boomgaarden, 1996). Marc Boomgaarden in his research identified potential advantages by consolidating administration, communications, fire prevention, training, maintenance, purchasing, response and apparatus (Boomgaarden, 1996). This supports Lahaie’s 1994 recommendations for fire departments in central Penobscot County to consolidate training, code management, public education, juvenile firesetter intervention, fire cause determination, apparatus maintenance and joint purchasing (Lahaie, 1994, p.16).

When examining cost savings and increased efficiency in service delivery resulting from consolidation it is often evident that one complements the other. “It is conceivable that consolidation might be a good idea if service will be greatly improved, even if the money savings is not overwhelming. It is important to remember that a consolidated system that allows your agency to offer better service for the same money is, in effect, a cost savings (Hagstrom, 1999).

2. How have other governmental agencies consolidated fire protection services?

“While it is estimated that in 1990 there were only 20 to 30 consolidations happening nationwide, we estimate that currently there are more than 500 such efforts in one stage or another” (Jensen, 2000, p.102). In the northeast, particularly in Maine, consolidation has been openly discussed for many years but of the 494 fire departments in the State of Maine all operate independently and no consolidation efforts are underway (Maine Legislature, 1999).

Despite the parochial New England atmosphere there is still a desire to move toward consolidation in many areas of fire protection and emergency medical services. This desire is fueled as “citizen’s request for services continue to increase while the funding necessary to provide services remains stagnant or are declining” (Boomgaarden, 1996). Alec Jensen (2000) confirms that “current trends indicate that providers will pursue cooperative initiatives between local jurisdiction at an accelerated rate” (p. 102).

For communities who are considering consolidation there are four options of regional consolidation. Functional consolidations involve working agreements between agencies who share facilities such as regional communications centers or training areas. Partial consolidation involves a higher level of commitment between two or more communities and could involve jointly staffing a fire station. Operational consolidation involves departments with basic similarities combining into one agency. A merger is where a larger department absorbs a smaller adjacent organization. (Boomgaarden, 1996, p.19). Jensen (2000) suggests that transition between these consolidations options is often a by-product of a successful consolidation. “Joint purchasing, support services or operations are a typical beginning. What starts as sharing a truck that neither agency could afford on it’s own, frequently evolves to joint training, dispatch services and chief

officer coverage” (Jensen, 2000). Rule (1992) states “loyalty isn’t what it once was. Some people think the city’s name has to be on the side of the truck but in our more mobile society, people just care about service” (p.33).

Rule (1992) indicates “consolidation is not an easy sell and should be approached as a long-term process” (p.34). The Nebraska Commission on Local Government (1997) concurred with Rule that there are challenges facing consolidation. “Despite the desire for innovation, cooperation, and collaboration there continues to be a strong desire to protect one’s turf” (p.2). However, Jensen (2000) states “in situations where local control remains a key objective, providers have identified specific areas where cooperation makes sense without sacrificing the ability to set service levels and conduct long range planning” (p.104). “Some aspects of the turf issue are questions of power and some are concerns regarding local control and employee security. Public safety that is closer to home is perceived to be more understandable, manageable, controllable and feels more secure” (Nebraska Commission on Local Government, 1997).

Many communities outside New England have successfully completed and survived consolidation. On January 1, 1998, the fire departments of Toronto, North York, Scarborough, Etobicoke, York, and the Borough of East York in the Canadian Province of Ontario were merged into a 3150 member organization know as the Toronto Fire Services (Sells, 1999). Despite numerous challenges the merger has been considered successful. “The most important factor in our success is that we have with deference to our respective histories, focused on our collective interests. Each former fire department has contributed through its diversity of personnel, wealth of experience and unique operational and training traditions to the success of Toronto Fire Services” (Sells, 1999).

In 1999 the cities of Livermore and Pleasanton, California completely merged “in order to improve operational effectiveness and economic efficiencies” (League of California Cities, 2000). As with many consolidations the issue of control was a key concern. “In this case, two equally sized agencies were merged, improving fire protection, while maintaining the city manager form of governance and local elected official control” (League of California Cities, 2000). This merger was so successful that the communities were awarded the 1999 Helen Putnam award by the League of California Cities (p.1).

The City of Thornton, Colorado and West Adams County prior to the merger were both planning on building new fire stations in the same general geographic area (Colorado Public Safety, 1995). “Through the merger, the new district will close four existing stations and replace them with three stations which are better situated to respond to the existing service area” (p.1).

Barden (1998) reported that the communities of Riverside and Moreno Valley, California combined efforts and jointly constructed and now operate a combined fire station. “Total one-time savings for both cities amounted to about \$700,000 in capital costs by sharing construction expenses. In addition, each city saves about \$50,000 in annual operating costs” (Barden, 1998).

Quality leadership is critical for the success of any consolidation effort. Chief fire officials must manage the change effectively if positive results are to be realized. “The chiefs must support it and market it to the electoral bodies of the jurisdictions involved. Labor groups must be involved from early on and convinced of consolidations merits. If they are not involved in the planning process, it is doomed to failure” (Rule, 1992).

“While there are countless success stories, there are unfortunately a few failed attempts. Tragically, most failures are the result of some form of personal sabotage. For this reason, it’s important to proceed cautiously and objectively” (Jensen, 2000).

3. Are local municipal officials in central Penobscot County receptive to the consolidation of fire protection services?

Lahaie (1994), in his evaluation of fire protection services in the region concluded “the concerns of loss of control, satisfaction of current levels of service and fear of higher uncontrollable cost of operations were the major concerns of less informed respondents” (p.2). Lahaie further concluded that “territorialism would have to be abandoned and an embracement of the regional concept should be considered” (p.15).

Boomgaarden (1996) supported Lahaie’s conclusions that the top three reasons for consolidation failure are loss of control, loss of power and loss of jobs (p.29). “Dealing with loss of power and loss of control can be very difficult. Those who hold on to their empire for selfish reasons have lost sight of the reason they are in the business of protecting life and property” (Boomgaarden, 1996).

Repeatedly it is the local citizens and local elected officials who direct municipal officials to consider consolidation. “There is general agreement that government needs to be more efficient and innovative at all levels” (Nebraska Commission on Local Government, 1997). However, “resistance to consolidation can be expected and is predictable” (Boomgaarden, 1996). “For a consolidation effort to succeed it will be necessary to develop methods to deal with resistance offered” (p.30).

Surveys were sent to the local municipal officials, including town managers and local fire chiefs, from fourteen communities in central Penobscot County to determine

whether they are receptive to consolidation and what concerns they would have with consolidation of fire protection services. These surveys sparked significant discussion about regional fire protection consolidation among the fire chiefs. Foremost in these discussions was the issue of local control.

Summary of the Literature

The objective of this research is to explore if consolidation of fire protection agencies could improve the delivery and efficiency of fire and emergency medical services in central Penobscot County. The literature review gave credence to this research. The public is demanding more of local fire departments while at the same time limiting their financial resources. Fire departments must look toward innovative solutions such as functional consolidation with neighboring departments. In some cases considering a complete merger may be the best way to meet local service demands. These consolidations provide both financial and operational benefits, which result in greater efficiency and service to the citizens of the community.

PROCEDURES

Definition of Terms

Consolidation - The process of combining or uniting.

Emergency Medical Services – Network of resources linked together for the purpose of providing emergency care and transportation to victims of sudden illness or injury.

Parochial – Restricted to a narrow scope.

This research project employed descriptive methodologies to examine if the consolidation of fire protection services in central Penobscot County, Maine could improve the delivery and efficiency of fire and emergency medical services. The procedures used to complete this research began with a literature review of fire service journals, magazines and textbooks at the Learning Resource Center at the National Emergency Training Center in Emmitsburg, Maryland in August of 2000. Additional literature reviews were conducted at the Bangor Public Library in Bangor, Maine, the Holden Public Safety Library in Holden, Maine and the author's personal library between August, 2000 and January, 2001.

A survey instrument, which was titled "Fire and Emergency Medical Services Consolidation Survey," was developed to gather information about the current working relationships between the thirteen fire departments in central Penobscot Counties. A short answer survey was sent to each city or town manager in the region. A longer and more detailed survey was also sent to each fire chief in central Penobscot County. The survey was utilized to determine if local municipal leaders were receptive to the idea of consolidation (See Appendix A). The information sought included department personnel strength, current mutual-aid and automatic mutual-aid agreements, currently shared services and if local officials were truly interested in consolidation.

Assumptions and Limitations

The procedures used to complete this research project were based on several assumptions. First, it was assumed that all authors cited in the literature review performed objective and unbiased research. Second, it assumed that each survey was completed by the intended respondent. One fire chief contacted the author and stated he

had been given the City / Town Manager survey by his manager and asked to complete the survey. The fire chief reported that he returned the survey to his manager and asked his manager to complete the survey. Third, it was assumed that each respondent understood each question. Fourth, it was assumed that each survey respondent answered all questions honestly. Finally, it was assumed that survey respondents did not discuss the survey with other respondents prior to completing the survey.

Limitations that affected this research project included the limited research period allowed. This limited research period did not allow for a statewide or national sampling.

RESULTS

Answers to Research Questions

Research Question 1. As many communities search for innovative methods to provide fire protection and emergency medical services the consolidation of these services between neighboring communities is getting a serious look. City managers faced with continuing fiscal restraints can expect unchanged or even increased demands by the public, calls for hiring freezes by elected leaders, requests for more specific performance indicators and calls for more innovative and creative ways to provide traditional savings (Sobba, 1998). “If the public has reason to trust that emergency responders will be prompt, well equipped and competent, it will accept and even demand consolidation” (Rule, 1992).

The benefits to consolidation depend on the extent of consolidation and the commitment of the involved agencies and communities. The primary benefits associated

with consolidation are reduced costs and increased service efficiency. The first benefit often evaluated, and most often the driving force behind consolidation, is cost savings.

Financial benefits realized from consolidations come primarily from capital equipment. The leading capital equipment expenditure for most fire departments is apparatus. "Consolidation can result in the need for less total apparatus as reserve apparatus can be shared and distributed throughout the region" (Boomgaarden, 1996). Expensive apparatus such as aerial trucks and heavy rescue units can serve and benefit more than one community while the expense of these units can be shared. Cost sharing of fire station construction and operation is another possible capital expense savings opportunity for consolidated agencies. Shared training areas can also be a source of financial savings. Capital equipment savings can also be realized by sharing high cost specialized equipment such as thermal imaging cameras, mobile cascade systems, hazardous material and specialized rescue equipment. Because of the extremely high price of apparatus and specialized equipment the primary cost savings resulting from consolidation come from this area (Rule, 1992).

Improved efficiency in consolidation efforts comes from various functions and operations. "Consolidating can allow combined management personnel to specialize, causing some tasks that continually were put off to be completed, and others that could not receive sufficient attention to be done more effectively" (Hagstrom, 1999). Specialized areas that may not be obvious to the public include administrative functions such as payroll, equipment service records, personnel records and planning and research. Shared dispatch centers provide a central communications point which improves efficiency and also reduces duplication of communication equipment and personnel, thus

having the added benefit of saving money. Services such as public fire safety and injury prevention education, fire inspections and fire investigations can also be shared between communities providing better program continuity and financial savings on personnel costs. Combined maintenance facilities and personnel both improve efficiency and save taxpayer dollars.

Combined training between personnel from different communities can standardize procedures as well as foster better communication and teamwork. An important by-product of the working relationship is the increased cross-training the crews receive from exposure to each others methods (Barden, 1998). There are often fewer problems between personnel who work, train and respond together because there is more camaraderie (Garza, 2000).

Better distribution of manpower and improved response is often noticed by the public in communities with consolidated services. Firefighters benefit from improved response by an improved command structure and the ability to put more firefighters on the fire scene sooner. Many smaller communities do not have a senior level commander available 24 hours a day. By combining resources senior level commanders from consolidating agencies can provide coverage for the entire area (Lahaie, 1994). With a better command structure comes an improved accountability system for personnel at the fire scene. "A regional consolidation could provide a single system for all personnel on scene (Haney, 1998). NFPA 1500, Standard on Fire Department Occupational Safety and Health Program, establishes guidelines for firefighter safety and set the standard for a two-person rapid intervention team (NFPA, 1992). Consolidation provides the benefit of

more personnel and more equipment on the scene faster to allow for a safer and more efficient fire suppression operation.

Research Question 2. Whether functional, partial, operational or complete merger fire departments across the country have had generally good results with consolidation efforts. What was estimated to be 20 to 30 consolidation efforts in 1990 across the United States is now more than 500 (Jensen, 2000).

“Most agree that successful mergers require good leadership and patience” (Gorza, 2000). In essence when two or more departments merge so do their cultures. To be successful you must honor the past traditions and recognize those who built the former system. “It takes leadership at the company, battalion and administrative levels” (Gorza, 2000).

Unfortunately, not all consolidations are successful. Individual circumstances need to be carefully considered before a final decision as whether to consolidate or not is made (Haney, 1998). In California “after almost a year of studying the possibility of consolidating the fire services of Los Altos, the Los Altos County Fire Protection District, Mountain View and Palo Alto, the conclusion is that it’s feasible but not practical” (Domingue, 2000). There were not enough money incentives to gain public support for the consolidation, but the process did identify several areas of functional consolidation areas such as training, paramedic service and communication. (Domingue, 2000).

The merger of Livermore and Pleasanton, California, in an effort to improve operational effectiveness and economic efficiencies, was a success. This merger

provided for combined operations while maintaining local elected official control (League of California Cities, 1999).

In Colorado in 1995 the City of Thornton and the West Adams County Fire Protection District merged to enhance fire and emergency medical services. Significant savings of \$300,000 to \$500,000 were realized by residents of these communities as a result. Most of the savings came from consolidating stations. In this case the firefighters were represented by a union and the merged districts successfully completed a collective bargaining agreement for the employees of both departments which contributed to the success of the merger (Colorado Public Safety, 1995).

In 1998 the Toronto Fire Services was formed as a result of a consolidation of six area departments around Toronto, Ontario. An important factor in the success of this project was the inclusion of fire department leaders in the consolidation effort. “A subcommittee of experienced district and platoon chiefs from each municipality was formed to serve as subject matter experts” (Sells, 1999).

In a functional consolidation six independent communication centers, responsible for dispatching four law enforcement agencies and eight fire departments consolidated into one communication center in Sarasota, Florida (Lorow, 1997). “Numerous issues had to be worked out, from salaries to equipment, before any one of the six centers would get together under one roof” (Lorow, 1997, p.55). Listening to the concerns of the public and the employees, as well as, time and extensive planning were cited as reasons for the success of this consolidation (Lorow, 1997).

In another functional consolidation the City of Riverside, California and the Moreno Valley, California Fire Departments combined efforts and constructed a shared

fire station. Significant savings were realized in construction costs and on-going building maintenance, which is shared equally by the two communities (Barden, 1998). The two fire chiefs “brought together a working staff consisting of representatives from both fire departments and both unions” (Barden, 1998, p.108). Communication and cooperation led to cost savings and operational efficiency.

Successful mergers and consolidations require two-way communication, cooperation, compromise and a commitment by all involved to be successful (Garza, 2000).

Research Question 3.

“The “C” word, consolidation. For some, the mere thought of the word sends shivers down their spines. But the fact of the matter is that many agencies are taking a long, hard look at consolidating” (Lorow, 1997). The communities in central Penobscot County appear to support consolidation, but they are extremely hesitant to move beyond simply talking about it. Survey results of the managers and fire chiefs in the region revealed that over half of the fourteen municipalities in central Penobscot County had at some point considered consolidating fire protection and/or emergency medical services with another community. However, none of the communities has consolidated to date.

A 1996 report, which evaluated consolidation options for the four largest communities in central Penobscot County, recommended several areas of functional consolidation. Of the nine primary recommendations only one, combined training, was attempted but it was abandoned shortly after it began.

All of the communities surveyed reported having written mutual aid agreements with neighboring communities. Seven reported that they have signed a county mutual aid agreement, while four reported that they have written automatic mutual aid agreements.

Evidence of the move toward the consolidation of services is the fact that all the fire departments in central Penobscot County share dispatch facilities. Nine of the fire departments are currently dispatched by the Penobscot County Regional Communication Center. Three fire departments are dispatched by the Old Town Fire Department. The Bangor Fire Department recently consolidated dispatch facilities with the Bangor Police Department

City and town managers surveyed indicated that their greatest concern regarding consolidation was the issue of control. This sentiment was echoed loudly by each of the fire chiefs who were surveyed. Other concerns cited by managers were the level of service and the costs associated with consolidation. A survey of fire chiefs found that in addition to control issues, including the potential loss of manpower, there is concern about the organizational structure of a consolidated agency, the distribution of apparatus and equipment and the past history of local consolidation efforts.

When asked if they would be supportive of consolidating with another agency 10 of the fire chiefs (71%) indicated they would. Over half of the city and town managers reported that their elected leaders were generally supportive of regional initiatives such as consolidation of public services.

DISCUSSION

1. What are the benefits of consolidating fire protection agencies?

The findings of the researcher conclude that “for cities faced with increased demands for service, but with dwindling funds to meet those demands, consolidation may be the appropriate course of action” (Sobba, 1998). Although mutual aid agreements may be effective, they represent only a small fraction of the potential benefits that can be gained through sharing resources between departments and communities. As communities grow, the demand for specialized services, as well as service levels in general grow. Legislative and administrative bodies at the state and federal levels have passed mandates that strain providers’ ability to meet fiscal, safety, legal and organizational demands (Jensen, 2000).

Currently “the level of fire protection is locally determined and there is not much of a reference for local policymakers” (Wolf, 2000). Although no such nationally recognized standard exists the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) is “currently developing two new deployment standards to help career and volunteer departments get the resources they need to do an effective and safe job – and meet the public’s expectations of quick response and protection” (p.51). The new deployment standards address desirable staffing levels and suggest response times and some details of operations (Wolf, 2000). Consolidation will certainly help many small communities meet these new standards.

Regional communication centers appear to be gaining in popularity. These centers have proven that consolidation of services not only make sense, but also work. As communities look for ways to consolidate services combined training and automatic mutual aid response are relatively easy first steps because local departments and

communities retain control. In fact, communication, training and consolidated response can act as a foundation to other consolidation efforts. Once the foundation had been laid and a level of trust has been established between departments and communities, further steps could be taken. Other benefits that could be realized from consolidation include the sharing of major equipment, including reserve apparatus, shared training areas, cooperative fire prevention and investigation programs and shared administrative resources (Rule, 1992).

The primary benefits of consolidation from the fire service manager's perspective is reduced operating costs, increased effectiveness and efficiency in service delivery (Emergency Services Consulting Group, 1996). The real benefit of a consolidation effort in the eyes of political leaders is that in addition to increased efficiency the community has the ability to redirect taxpayer dollars to other city services (Colorado Public Safety, 1995).

As communities consider consolidation they must evaluate the benefits closely and realize that cost savings, which are often the driving force behind consolidation movements, will most probably only come occasionally as a result of sharing capital equipment. The greater benefit is actually in the increased efficiency in service for the customer. In any event, "considering alternatives to the traditional approach of providing emergency medical services and fire protection is a natural extension of good government" (Emergency Services Consulting Group, 1996).

2. How have other governmental agencies consolidated fire protection services?

Garza (2000) reported that consolidating agencies essentially amounts to merging cultures. "A successful merger requires two-way communication, cooperation,

compromise and a commitment by management” (Garza, 2000). “Success also requires an alliance among management, labor and policymakers. Most importantly, however, it has to do with motivation, the ability to set egos aside, taking time to build relationships based on trust and following through on commitments” (Jensen, 2000).

Consolidations seem to be more prevalent in the western portion of the United States than in the east. This is most probably due to the more independent nature of the east coast culture. The competitive atmosphere of the fire service dates back to the 1800’s when volunteer fire companies were very tightly knit social groups. “Many of the early companies were very proud, exclusive, influential and competitive. These rivalries between the volunteers extended to interference with each other in responding to the fire scene and finally resulted in fights and riots” (ICMA, 1988). Unfortunately, because of the long history of competition, control and turf issues consolidation efforts have been difficult. Jensen (2000) concluded that most of the consolidation failures have been the result of personal sabotage.

Despite difficulties and challenges there have been countless consolidation success stories. Rule (1992) stated that if consolidation is carefully and properly planned and marketed, support will be greater than resistance. Boomgaarden (1996) identified four options for regional consolidation. Functional consolidation consists of communities and departments sharing facilities such as dispatch or training centers. Partial consolidation involved such programs as jointly staffing a fire station. Operational consolidation takes departments with basic similarities and combines them into one department. Finally, a merger takes place when a larger department absorbs a

smaller, adjacent organization. The decision as to which type of consolidation is best depends on the communities, departments and personnel involved.

“Whether the trend toward cooperative initiatives is the result of progressive thinking on the part of fire service managers or the by-product of citizen-initiated tax limitation measures doesn’t matter. What does matter is that egos are being set aside and decisions are being made with the end user in mind” (Jensen, 2000). Regardless of the type or extent of consolidation being considered strong leadership and the ability to do what is right for the customer is critical to a successful consolidation.

3. Are local municipal officials in central Penobscot County receptive to the consolidation of fire protection services?

Lahaie (1994) found that there was substantial resistance to consolidation in central Penobscot County. He went on to say that “territorialism will have to be abandoned and an embracement of the regional concept should be considered” (Lahaie, 1994, p. 15). Although resistance to consolidation in central Penobscot County now appears to be diminished there is still considerable apprehension among local leaders to enter into consolidation agreements. Boomgaarden (1996) best summarized the feelings of local municipal leaders when he reported that the loss of control and loss of power lead the list of reason why people resist consolidation.

Local municipal leaders in central Penobscot County give positive lip service to consolidation and are clearly aware of the benefits but are still unwilling to make consolidation a priority. The best evidence of this was the recommendations of the Emergency Services Consulting Group (1996) who evaluated the four largest fire departments in central Penobscot County. Only one of the consolidation

recommendations was attempted and none were completed, despite the fact that the municipal leaders of these communities responded in surveys that they generally support the idea of consolidation. The Nebraska Commission on Local Control (1997) best described this situation by saying “despite the desire for innovation, cooperation and collaboration there continues to be a strong desire to protect one’s turf” (p.2).

Sobba (1998) stated “whether consolidation can meet the needs of the community and the expectations of its citizens rests with the individual municipality” (p.1). For consolidation in central Penobscot County to be successful organizational control and turf issues must be addressed to the satisfaction of all involved. But, “whatever approach is taken, the motivation must be in the best interest of the public whom you serve” (Thomas, 1994). Boomgaarden (1996) warns that “the fire service delivery system decision makers have the opportunity to be somewhat proactive regarding regional consolidation. If they wait they may be reacting to the law of catastrophic reform” (p.35).

RECOMMENDATIONS

A merger of the fire departments serving the fourteen communities of central Penobscot County is not practical now. It is the recommendation of this author that the communities actively work toward functional consolidation at a minimum, with operational or complete merger consolidation as a long-range goal. Functional consolidation could be achieved most easily between communities which are geographically similar and who already work closely together. As clusters of communities form successful functional consolidations these clusters could be

consolidated, eventually consolidating all fourteen communities in a gradual step process. Functional consolidation agreements could include scheduled combined officer's meetings and training sessions between departments. Automatic mutual-aid agreements between the communities would effectively eliminate political boundaries and the closest available units would respond to emergency incidents. The dispatching of automatic mutual-aid would be made easier if all departments were dispatched from the same dispatch center. The establishment of combined officer meetings, training and response agreements would serve as a foundation for further consolidation of services. By taking small steps and beginning the consolidation process with small successes will allow each community the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of the relationship with the other communities, while at the same time evaluating any loss of autonomy and local control.

The 1996 report by Emergency Services Consulting Group, which examined consolidation between the four largest communities in central Penobscot County, should be re-examined. Further study is needed to evaluate why none of the recommendations have been followed and determine what steps need to be taken to successfully enact the recommendations. If the larger communities set the example the smaller communities will most probably witness the benefits of consolidation and will be more willing to participate.

REFERENCES

- Barden, Jerry (1998, March). Share and Share Alike. *Fire Chief*, 106-109.
- Boomgaarden, Marc C. (January, 1996) *Consolidation of Fire and Life Safety Delivery Systems in Sutter County*. Emmitsburg, MD: National Fire Academy, Executive Fire Officer Program.
- Colorado Public Safety. (1995). *Consolidation of City and County Fire District*. Denver, CO: Author. Retrieved October 20, 2000, from the World Wide Web:
<http://www.gol.org/co2.html>
- Dominique, Joanne (2000). *Fire Services Consolidation Not Practical Expert Says*. Town Crier. Retrieved October 20, 2000, from the World Wide Web:
http://www.losaltosonline.com/late/arch/9613/3_news/fire_consolidation
- Emergency Services Consulting Group. (October 1996). *Final Report: Regional Fire and Emergency Rescue Services Plan for the Municipalities of Bangor, Brewer, Old Town & Orono*. York, PA: Author.
- Federal Emergency Management Agency, United States Fire Administration. (1996). *Strategic Management of Change Student Manual*. Emmitsburg, MD: Author.
- Garza, Marion (2000, December). Can This Marriage Be Saved? *Journal of Emergency Medical Services*, 24-73.
- Hagstrom, Jennifer (1999, February). How Do You Know? Is Your Agency a Good Candidate for Consolidation? *APCO Bulletin*, 65, 8-11.
- Haney, Paul (October 1998). *A Feasibility Study of Public Fire Service Consolidation for the Southwest Council of Government*. Emmitsburg, MD: National Fire Academy, Executive Fire Officer Program.

- International City Management Association (1988). *Managing Fire Services*. Washington D.C.: Author.
- Jensen, Alec (2000, February). Consolidation a' la' carte. *Fire Chief*, 102-105.
- Lahaie, Sherman, L. (July, 1994). *Consolidation of Local Fire Departments. Is it Time?* Emmitsburg, MD: National Fire Academy, Executive Fire Officer Program.
- League of California Cities. (2000). *1999 Award Winners*. California: Author. Retrieved October 20, 2000, from the World Wide Web:
http://www.cacities.org/members/features/helen_putnam/public.safety.html
- Lorow, Cindy (1997, June). Consolidation Works in Sarasota County, Florida. *APCO Bulletin*, 63, 54-57.
- Maine Legislature Office of Policy and Legal Analysis. (December 1999). *Final Report of the Commission to Study the Enhancement of Fire Protection Services Throughout the State*. Augusta, ME: Author.
- National Fire Protection Association (1992). *NFPA 1500, Standard on Fire Department Occupational Safety and Health Program*. Quincy, MA: Author.
- Nebraska Commission on Local Government Innovation and Restructuring. (December 1998). *Public Safety Study. A Report to the Nebraska Legislature*. Omaha, NB: Author. Retrieved October 20, 2000, from the World Wide Web:
<http://www.state.ne.us/home/clgir/sftyrpt.html>
- Rule, Charles (1992, January). Consolidation/Regionalization: Answers for the Future? *Fire Chief*, 33-35.
- Sells, Peter (1999, April). Consolidation Poses Training Challenges. *Fire Chief*, 28-30.

Sobba, Robert, L. (1998). *Public Services Consolidation: The Answer to Your Community's Needs*. Retrieved on October 20, 2000, from the World Wide Web:

<http://www.totse.com/files/fa019/consolidation.html>

Thomas, Jan (1994, March). When One Plus One Make One. *Fire Chief*, 105-106.

Wolf, Alisa (2000, November/December). Resources and Responses: Fire Service Organization and Deployment. *NFPA Fire Journal*, 51-54.

APPENDIX A
Consolidation Survey

**FIRE and EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES
CONSOLIDATION SURVEY**

FIRE CHIEF

Municipality: _____

Population: _____

Square Miles: _____

Municipal Budget: _____

Fire/EMS Budget: _____

Number of Emergency Calls Annually: Fire _____
EMS _____

Number of Personnel: Career _____
Paid-Call _____
Volunteer _____

Number of Apparatus: Engines _____ **Number of Stations:** _____
Tankers _____
Aerials _____
Rescues _____
Ambulances _____
Other Apparatus _____

1. What is the average number of firefighters your department can assemble within 8 to 10 minutes to respond to a fire in your community between 8am and 5pm, Monday thru Friday? (*Circle One*)

1 to 5

16 to 20

6 to 10

21 to 25

11 to 15

26 to 30

More Than 30

2. Does your department currently have a written mutual aid agreement with any other fire department? (*Circle One*)

YES

NO

3. Has your department signed the Penobscot County Mutual Aid Agreement?

YES

NO

If no, does your department plan on signing the Penobscot County Mutual Aid Agreement?

YES

NO

4. Does your department currently have a written automatic mutual aid agreement with any other fire department?

YES

NO

5. Has your department ever considered consolidating fire protection or emergency medical services with another community?

YES

NO

If yes, is consolidation of services still being considered?

YES

NO

6. Are there areas in your community that are geographically closer to a neighboring community's fire station?

YES

NO

7. Does your department currently conduct combined training sessions with other departments?

YES

NO

If yes, how often? _____

8. Does your department currently share any of the following functions with another fire department? (*Circle all that apply*)

Training Area

Equipment Purchasing

Dispatch / Communications

Fire Prevention/Inspection

Fleet Maintenance

Fire Investigation

Administrative Services

Public Education

9. If your municipality was approached to merge or join a fire protection district would you be supportive?

YES

NO

10. What would be your concerns as Fire Chief if your community joined a fire protection district?

11. How important is local control and identity?

12. Would your community lose or gain benefits if you consolidated fire protection resources with another community? Please explain.

13. What challenges would need to be addressed if your community were to consolidate fire protection and / or emergency medical services with another community?

14. Do you have any other thoughts or concerns regarding consolidation of fire protection and / or emergency medical services?

**FIRE and EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES
CONSOLIDATION SURVEY**

CITY / TOWN MANAGER

Municipality: _____

Population: _____

Square Miles: _____

Municipal Budget: _____

Fire/EMS Budget: _____

- 1. If your municipality was approached to merge or join a fire protection district what would be your greatest concern?**
- 2. Would your community lose or gain benefits if you consolidated fire protection resources with other communities? Please explain.**
- 3. How important is the matter of local control and identity?**
- 4. Has your community ever considered consolidating fire protection and/or emergency medical services with another community?**
- 5. Are your elected leaders generally supportive of regional initiatives such as consolidation of public services with other communities?**

APPENDIX B

Survey Results

**FIRE and EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES
CONSOLIDATION SURVEY**

FIRE CHIEF

Municipality: _____

Population: 87,500

Square Miles: 400

Municipal Budget: _____

Fire/EMS Budget: \$10,125,068

Number of Emergency Calls Annually: Fire 3577
EMS 5690

Number of Personnel: Career 158
Paid-Call 270
Volunteer _____

Number of Apparatus: Engines 33 **Number of Stations:** 18
Tankers 8
Aerials 5
Rescues 7
Ambulances 10
Other Apparatus 14 (Brush Trucks)

1. What is the average number of firefighters your department can assemble within 8 to 10 minutes to respond to a fire in your community between 8am and 5pm, Monday thru Friday? (*Circle One*)

1 to 5 (62%) 16 to 20 (15%)

6 to 10 (23%) 21 to 25

11 to 15 26 to 30

More Than 30

2. Does your department currently have a written mutual aid agreement with any other fire department? (*Circle One*)

YES (100%) NO

3. Has your department signed the Penobscot County Mutual Aid Agreement?

YES (50%) NO

If no, does your department plan on signing the Penobscot County Mutual Aid Agreement?

YES (6 Depts.) NO (1 Dept.)

4. Does your department currently have a written automatic mutual aid agreement with any other fire department?

YES (29%) NO (71%)

5. Has your department ever considered consolidating fire protection or emergency medical services with another community?

YES (57%) NO (43%)

If yes, is consolidation of services still being considered?

YES (43%) NO (57%)

6. Are there areas in your community that are geographically closer to a neighboring community's fire station?

YES (100%) NO

7. Does your department currently conduct combined training sessions with other departments?

YES (86%) NO (14%)

If yes, how often? _____

8. Does your department currently share any of the following functions with another fire department? (*Circle all that apply*)

(31%) Training Area (15%) Equipment Purchasing

(46%) Dispatch / Communications Fire Prevention/Inspection

Fleet Maintenance Fire Investigation

Administrative Services Public Education

9. If your municipality was approached to merge or join a fire protection district would you be supportive?

YES (71%)

NO (29%)

10. What would be your concerns as Fire Chief if your community joined a fire protection district?

Control (46%)

Service

Loss of Manpower

Past History of Consolidation Failures

Department Structure

11. How important is local control and identity?

Very (100%)

12. Would your community lose or gain benefits if you consolidated fire protection resources with another community? Please explain.

13. What challenges would need to be addressed if your community were to consolidate fire protection and / or emergency medical services with another community?

Labor Unions

Control & Funding

Loss of Manpower

Gain of Manpower

14. Do you have any other thoughts or concerns regarding consolidation of fire protection and / or emergency medical services?

“Need outside Professionals”

“Moving too slowly”

“The time is coming”

**FIRE and EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES
CONSOLIDATION SURVEY**

CITY / TOWN MANAGER

Municipality: _____

Population: _____

Square Miles: _____

Municipal Budget: _____

Fire/EMS Budget: _____

- 1. If your municipality was approached to merge or join a fire protection district what would be your greatest concern?**

Control (85%)

Cost/Budget (57%)

Level of Service (43%) Level of Service (43%)

- 2. Would your community lose or gain benefits if you consolidated fire protection resources with other communities? Please explain.**

“Must Gain”

“Loss of local knowledge”

“Capital Expenditures”

- 3. How important is the matter of local control and identity?**

“Control more important than identity”

“Foremost importance – Town needs to maintain ability to regulate”

“Very Important”

“Require significant other benefits to be willing to relax or relinquish control”

- 4. Has your community ever considered consolidating fire protection and/or emergency medical services with another community?**

Yes (57%)

No (43%)

- 5. Are your elected leaders generally supportive of regional initiatives such as consolidation of public services with other communities?**

Yes (57%) No(29%) Undecided (14%)