

**THE FEASIBILITY OF CONSOLIDATION BETWEEN THE STERLING PARK
RESCUE SQUAD AND THE STERLING VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT**

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The problem is a declining volunteer and financial base for the operations of the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department as volunteer agencies within the same jurisdiction. The purpose of this project is to determine the feasibility of, and make recommendations for, the consolidation of the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department.

The study included a review of the relevant literature in the National Fire Academy's (NFA) Learning Resource Center (LRC), the Management Information Center of the International Association of Fire Chiefs and information available on-line on the Internet. Personal interviews of were conducted for research and background material. Fire and emergency service agencies that had experienced consolidation efforts were also studied.

Evaluative research methodologies were employed for this study in order to answer the following questions:

1. What has occurred with other fire and emergency service agencies involved in a consolidation?
2. What advantages and disadvantages are present for a consolidation between the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department?
3. What factors must be considered in evaluating a consolidation?

Procedures involved the review of significant literature, personal interviews and local documents.

The results indicated that there are a number of departments and research studies that can provide information about factors to consider in consolidations. These sources also provide advantages and disadvantages of consolidation efforts. The results also found that the financial

impact on the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department in a consolidation would likely be negative in the present situation of revenue generation versus cost savings.

It is recommended that the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department not actively participate in consolidation efforts at present, however, if financial or other circumstances change in the future, it may be a beneficial step for the agencies.

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INTRODUCTION

The problem is a declining volunteer and financial base for the operations of the Sterling Park Rescue Squad (SPRS) and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department as volunteer agencies within the same jurisdiction. This project's purpose is to determine the feasibility of, and make recommendations for, the consolidation of the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department.

The study included a review of the relevant literature in the National Fire Academy's (NFA) Learning Resource Center (LRC), the Management Information Center of the International Association of Fire Chiefs and information available on-line on the Internet. Fire and emergency service agencies that had experienced consolidation efforts were also studied. Additionally, personal interviews were conducted for research and background material.

Evaluative research methodologies were employed for this study in order to answer the following questions:

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BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Sterling Park Rescue Squad was established in 1964 in the Eastern Loudoun County community of Sterling to provide emergency medical and rescue services to the citizens. The Sterling Volunteer Fire Department was established 2 years later in 1966 to provide fire

protection and suppression services to the community (D. Short, personal communication, May 9, 1999). The Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department, after operating out of separate stations for many years, built a combined station in 1971 and the two organizations began operating from one facility (B.F. Andrews, personal communication, May 10, 1999). In order to manage the issues related to the land and building a third corporation was established in 1970, the Sterling Safety Center. The Sterling Safety Center owns, operates and maintains the physical facilities for the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department. The Sterling Safety Center Board of Directors is composed of five members of the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and five members of the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department with the position of chairperson rotating between the two organizations annually (B.F. Andrews, personal communication, May 10, 1999).

In 1983, faced with a rapidly expanding community, the Sterling Safety Center built a smaller sub-station in the Northern portion of the service area on land obtained through the County of Loudoun. As the service demands continued to grow with the community, in 1997 a second Safety Center was constructed on land given to the Sterling Safety Center by a developer. This station also houses both the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department (B.F. Andrews, personal communication, May 10, 1999).

The Sterling Park Rescue Squad is an all-volunteer agency that responds to more than 4,400 emergency calls per year (Sterling Park Rescue Squad, 1998). The Sterling Volunteer Fire Department is also a volunteer agency supplemented by career staffing during the weekdays through the Loudoun County Department of Fire and Rescue. Both departments rely on a steady stream of volunteers as the call volumes increase with community growth.

The Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department are funded

through a combination of community and business donations and proffers. Proffers are donations obtained through zoning ordinances whereby development associations collect monthly donations from residents or business owners make contributions based on the square footage of the business. In addition, both agencies receive a contribution from the County of Loudoun consisting of a base rate and an amount per emergency call run by the agency (M. Maguire, personal communication, March 11, 1999).

The leadership of the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department have contemplated the advantages and disadvantages of a consolidation of the two agencies in informal settings for many years, however, no formal discussions have occurred as of present. As the service demands continue to rise and the revenue streams are not increasing with community growth, the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department are beginning to consider many options for advancing the organizations into the future, including consolidation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature and available resources has produced the following information for this study.

1. What has occurred with other fire and emergency service agencies involved in a consolidation?

There are several agencies and organizations that have undergone consolidation efforts or have experience in consolidation issues which were used as resources for this study.

The present-day Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue Department near Portland, Oregon, is the product of several consolidations of smaller fire and rescue agencies, and has studied the consolidation of other agencies extensively (Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue [TVFR], 1995, p.

ii). The department cites many challenges they experienced in the planning and implementation phases of the consolidations, including the merging of administrative staff, the feelings of the department members, political obstacles, differences in operational procedures, changes in organization names, and issues dealing with authority and responsibility (TVFR, 1995). The department also struggled with issues of standardization of equipment, philosophical differences and who will lead the agency after the consolidation (TVFR, 1995). While there were many challenges in the consolidation efforts encountered by Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue, the agency concluded that the consolidations were very beneficial and published materials to assist other departments in effective consolidations (TVFR, 1995).

The Lexington, Missouri, Fire Department and Emergency Medical Services Department investigated the possibility of a consolidation in 1991 (Fischer, 1991). The Lexington agencies noted that a major obstacle in consolidation of the fire and EMS agencies is the attitude of non-cooperation between members of the two agencies (Fischer, 1991). The conclusion of the study of the possible consolidation between the Lexington Fire Department and the Lexington EMS Department was that a consolidation would benefit the organizational and operational efficiency of the departments and the service delivery (Fischer, 1991).

In 1994, the Fernridge Rural Fire Department in Veneta, Oregon, examined the possibility of consolidation with neighboring agencies (Kamrath, 1994.) The study also found that consolidation of the smaller fire departments would be very beneficial, although the researcher identified many critical challenges that would have to be overcome.

A 1995 study of independent fire districts in Collier County, Lee County and Manatee County, Florida, reviewed the effects of non-economic factors in consolidations and mergers of fire and emergency service organizations (Latessa, 1995). The study found that members of

departments facing potential consolidations had negative perceptions concerning cohesion of the groups, standardization of policies and procedures, communications, department loyalty and satisfaction of the department members (Latessa, 1995). The study concluded that many department members believed that increasing the size of an agency through consolidation would provide greater rewards and benefits for members (Latessa, 1995). Lastly, the study noted that there were no negative perceptions present in the department members concerning fairness of treatment, decision making ability and the level of authority within the consolidated departments (Latessa, 1995).

A study of the Lake County, Illinois, fire protection leaders and public officials found that there were different opinions about consolidation between the two groups and that the fire service leaders were more supportive of potential consolidations than were the public officials (McGrath, 1995). During the research process, McGrath (1995) also found that the majority of consolidation studies and discussions occur as a result of a departmental or jurisdictional crisis, predominantly related to financial issues.

VFIS, a company providing insurance coverage and services to fire and emergency service agencies, studied consolidation efforts in many communities and has published a manual to assist other agencies considering or undergoing the consolidation process (VFIS, 1994). The general guidance given in support of consolidation efforts is that “the concept is based on an awareness that when we work together and share the resources we each have, we can accomplish more” (VFIS, 1994, p. 58).

The Edmonton Emergency Response Department in Canada, researched the issue of consolidation within their agency. According to the study, some of the EMS leaders within the EMS department felt that the consolidation was more like a “hostile takeover” or acquisition than

a traditional cooperative consolidation, which was not beneficial to the working relationships post-consolidation (Williams, 1995). The creation of a new name for the consolidated organization in Edmonton was perceived as helpful in the merger implementation, however, the organizations were missing tangible actions toward a coordinated and combined agency after the philosophical implementation of the consolidation, resulting in poor perceptions of department members (Williams, 1995, p. 133).

2. What advantages and disadvantages are present for a consolidation between the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department?

Many of the research sources pertaining to general consolidation information or specific consolidation case studies provided advantages and disadvantages for consideration in the case of the potential consolidation between the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department.

In the case of the consolidations in the Tualatin Valley area, the research notes that there were many advantages to consolidations of independent fire and emergency service agencies including: a reduction in funding for legal fees and board of directors expenses; unification of operating procedures; the delivery and creation of training; coordination of public education materials; a standardized accounting and filing system; better inventory management; the creation of larger and more substantial libraries; and mapping systems (TVFR, 1994). The Tualatin Valley model also stated that there were improvements in grant procurement processes, hazardous materials responses, staffing issues and an improved community rating from the Insurance Services Office (TVFR, 1994).

The Lexington Fire Department and Lexington EMS Department consolidation resulted in improvements in staffing and new station locations which added to the productivity of the

resulting agency (Fischer, 1991). The agency also realized a cost savings in joint purchasing and the members of the agency reported a more equitable system of salaries (Fischer, 1991).

The Fernridge Rural Fire Department, in their study of potential consolidation, described advantages such as enhanced opportunities for career development within a larger organization as well as the ability to specialize in certain functions which were not a specialty within the smaller organizations (Kamrath, 1994). Their study did note that there were several key disadvantages with a potential consolidation, including a loss of autonomy and individuality within the smaller agencies and the creation of a larger bureaucratic structure (Kamrath, 1994).

The study of attitudes concerning consolidation in the Southwest Florida counties stated that there were a number of elements that created obstacles toward consolidation, including coordination of resources, cohesion among department members, standardization implementation and communications issues (Latessa, 1995).

Similar to the findings in the Tualatin Valley study, the VFIS noted a key advantage in many department consolidations is an improvement in the community's Insurance Services Office rating (VFIS, 1994, p.5). The VFIS research indicates that organizations can face tremendous challenges in consolidation efforts if they are very different in their mission or scope and inadequate communication between the potential consolidated agencies (VFIS, 1994).

3. What factors must be considered in evaluating a consolidation?

All of the aforementioned advantages and disadvantages in consolidation discussions would likewise be factors that may be considered in evaluating a consolidation.

In addition to the advantages and disadvantages, the literature suggests additional factors for consideration. One key consideration is that any agencies contemplating a consolidation or merger should understand that interests of the public who are being served must be the basic

motivation for the consolidation, for example, improved service delivery and financial efficiency (VFIS, 1994). Studies on consolidation also suggest that legal counsel be consulted very early in the consolidation discussions to ensure the protection of the agencies involved and the citizens served (VFIS, 1994).

The VFIS research includes the following set of factors which contribute to the success of a consolidation effort between fire and emergency service agencies: agencies that have agreements, cooperative ventures or other relationships with one another; agencies that foster an atmosphere of completely honest communication concerning the consolidation effort; sufficient time for planning prior to consolidation; an effective strategy and implementation of a communications plan for informing the authority having jurisdiction and the community itself of the consolidation; and the support of the agency leaders involved (VFIS, 1994).

To review factors for consideration in a potential consolidation between the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department, a Commissioner with the Loudoun County Fire and Rescue Commission was consulted. In relation to the proffers, which provide revenue for both agencies on an ongoing basis, it was found that a consolidation would not affect the amount of revenue received through presently existing and future proffer agreements (D. Rambo, personal communication, April 4, 1999). Additionally, Rambo (personal communication, April 4, 1999) noted that the contributions received by the two agencies from the County of Loudoun would be substantially decreased after a consolidation of the agencies because only one base payment would be received and the amount of per call funding would drop as there are many cases when the two departments are dispatched to the same emergency call. Lastly, in the opinion of Commissioner Rambo (personal communication, April 4, 1999), the representation of a consolidated agency within the local government governance structure

would be diminished under the current structure.

Cost savings within the operating budgets are also factors for consideration in consolidation discussions. The literature review included a comparison of the budgets for Fiscal Year 1999 for the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department.

A majority of the issues found in the research could directly impact a potential consolidation between the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department.

PROCEDURES

Research Methodology

Evaluative research was the methodology used to conduct this research project. Six jurisdictions that contemplated or underwent consolidation initiatives were studied. The consolidation efforts were examined based on the research questions developed for the research project. One publication with a consolidation process model and general observations and findings concerning consolidation was researched. Additionally, personal interviews were conducted with key department leaders and basic background information about the agencies was collected. All consolidation initiatives, specific and generic, were studied in their relation to the research questions and their application to the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department. Additionally, the budgets of the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department were reviewed.

The application of this research to the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department in their potential consolidation is contained later in this report.

Assumptions

For the purposes of this Applied Research Project, it is assumed that all agencies studied did actively participate in consolidation efforts or discussions. It is also assumed that the information and recommendations in the references is accurate and well researched. Lastly, it is assumed that all personal interviews obtained by the researcher included factual information and were not biased by the interviewees opinions on the potential consolidation of the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department.

Limitations

A limitation of this Applied Research Project was the confinement of all research to references and printed materials, other than the personal interviews from local agency representatives. The researcher was unable to discuss the consolidation initiatives of other agencies with those agency personnel and key leadership based on time and financial constraints. Also, no case studies or general information were found that were specific to the situation present in the case of the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department. The two agencies are in a very unique situation being located in the same physical facilities and having unusual revenue sources.

Another important limitation in this study was the inability to review or research long-term effects of consolidations. The long term effects were not documented in the literature, and many of the agencies studied participated in consolidations less than ten years ago, which does not provide enough experience for long term effects to be reviewed.

RESULTS

The answers to this study's research questions are included in this portion of the document.

1. What has occurred with other fire and emergency service agencies involved in a consolidation?

The case studies of other fire and emergency service agencies that studied or implemented consolidation efforts provided several key points in reviewing the feasibility of a consolidation between the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department. Three of the agencies studied (Tualatin Valley, Oregon, Lexington, Missouri, and Veneta, Oregon) all concluded that consolidation efforts within their respective jurisdictions would be beneficial and have a positive impact on the provision of emergency services to the community (TVFR, 1995; Fischer 1991; Kamrath, 1994). Among the consolidation issues present in these three case studies are administrative concerns, the perceptions and attitudes of department members, the naming of the consolidated organization, non-cooperation between departments and issues related to authority and responsibility (TVFR, 1995; Fischer, 1991).

The 1995 study of independent fire districts in Florida indicated that non-economic factors are important issues to consider in consolidation efforts, including group cohesion, loyalty, department member satisfaction, standardization and communication (Latessa, 1995). A finding in the Florida study indicated that members of the agencies involved in consolidation efforts felt that an increase in the size of the agency through consolidation would provide greater benefits for the members (Latessa, 1995).

The Lake County, Illinois, study noted that many consolidation efforts arise from financial or other departmental-wide or jurisdiction-wide challenges (McGrath, 1995). The Edmonton, Canada, study found that the perception of the consolidation as a "hostile takeover"

as opposed to a cooperative amalgamation had a negative impact on their consolidation efforts (Williams, 1995).

The VFIS research on consolidation found that the basic tenet of consolidation efforts is that a coordinated amalgamation of human and physical resources can provide the ability to increase service provision and benefit the population served (VFIS, 1994).

2. What advantages and disadvantages are present for a consolidation between the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department?

The case studies and other research provided a number of advantages present in a consolidation between fire and emergency service agencies. The primary advantages noted from the research include: cost savings; training; administrative systems; inventory management; career development; creation/expansion of specialized resources; increased productivity; staffing and lowering a community ISO rating (TVFR, 1994; Fischer, 1991; Kamrath, 1994; VFIS, 1994).

The disadvantages or challenges in consolidation included the following areas: loss of autonomy; loss of department individuality; greater bureaucracy; lack of cohesion between department members; difficulties in standardization; and balancing organizations with differing missions (Kamrath, 1994; Latessa, 1995; VFIS 1994).

3. What factors must be considered in evaluating a consolidation?

All of the advantages and disadvantages found in the research are factors which should be considered in evaluating a consolidation. Additionally, it was noted that the best interest of the population served be a driving force in the consolidation and that departments consult legal assistance in all aspects of the consolidation process (VFIS, 1994). It was also found that open communications, previous cooperative relationships, proper planning and support from the

authority having jurisdiction are factors for consideration (VFIS, 1994).

From a strictly local standpoint, the factors for consideration include the proffer systems for revenue generation for the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department, the annual contributions received from the County of Loudoun, and the representation of a consolidated organization within the fire and emergency service system (D. Rambo, personal communication, April 4, 1999).

Lastly, a key consideration is the direct financial impact on the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department, including cost savings, revenue generation and resource management (D. Short, personal communication, May 16, 1999). A preliminary review of the budgets of the two organizations shows many areas of overlap in operating costs, including training, public education, administration, equipment, fundraising expenses, vehicle repairs and professional services (Sterling Park Rescue Squad, 1998; Sterling Volunteer Fire Department, 1998). While there are many areas of overlap, most are anticipated to be small cost savings (D. Short, personal communication, May 16, 1999).

DISCUSSION

There are many fire and emergency service agencies that have experienced or investigated consolidations, several of which were examined in this study. While most of the case studies reviewed recommended consolidation, (TVFR, 1995; Fischer, 1991; Kamrath, 1994) none of the agencies were similar to the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department. In particular, the issue of cost savings versus revenue generation in consolidation were not similar to the situation of the Sterling Park Rescue Squad or the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department.

The Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue Department study noted that the feelings of department members, differences in operational procedure and issues related to authority and responsibility were challenges faced in the consolidation (TVFR, 1995). These issues would also be challenges in a potential consolidation between the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department, particularly with the merging of two corporate structures as well as two differing operational structures into one set of governance for a consolidated agency. In the Lexington Fire Department study, the challenge they faced was an attitude of non-cooperation between members of the two agencies involved (Fischer, 1991). While the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department reside in the same physical facilities and function on emergency incidents jointly, they are not without disagreements or tension between the members of both agencies. This would not be a barrier to a potential consolidation, however, it will be an important factor to consider even in the early stages of consolidation discussions.

The Lake County, Illinois, study identified that a majority of consolidation studies and discussions result from department or jurisdictional crisis, often times financial crisis (McGrath, 1995). Should the revenue generators for the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department change drastically, the resulting financial crisis may have a significant bearing on the decision to discuss consolidation of the two agencies.

The Edmonton, Canada, study noted that a challenge they faced in consolidation was the feeling on the part of some members that the merger was a “hostile takeover” or acquisition rather than a true consolidation (Williams, 1995). This will be an important consideration in the potential consolidation of the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department and the leadership of both agencies should strive to ensure that this does not occur.

Rather, the agencies should look toward the guiding philosophy stated in the research by VFIS, “the concept is based on an awareness that when we work together and share the resources we each have, we can accomplish more” (VFIS, 1994, p.58).

All the advantages discovered within the literature review can be applied to a potential consolidation between the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department, including financial issues, training, administration, physical resources, staffing, productivity, career development and ISO ratings. Likewise, all of the disadvantages cited in the literature review could also apply to this potential consolidation, including loss of autonomy, department individuality, increased bureaucracy, cohesion of members, standardization and differing missions. Of significant concern is the issue of differing missions. The VFIS research found that organizations can face great challenges in consolidation if they are significantly different in mission or scope (VFIS, 1994). The Sterling Park Rescue Squad’s primary mission is to provide emergency medical and rescue services, while the mission of the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department is fire protection. While the functions of the two organizations may overlap, their primary missions remain different. It will be important that in a potential consolidation these primary missions remain equal and constant within a merged organization in order to maintain or increase the level of service provided to the community.

Many of the factors for successful consolidation, as researched by VFIS (1994) are important to a potential consolidation between the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department, including:

- Pre-existing agreements or cooperative ventures;
- Atmospheres of completely honest communication concerning the consolidation effort;
- Adequate planning;

- Communication with the authority having jurisdiction and the community; and
- The support of the agency leaders involved (VFIS, 1994).

These factors will all be critical in a consolidation between the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department. Each factor should be embraced by the leaders of both organizations, even in the very early stages of consolidation discussions. Laying the groundwork for a successful consolidation can start before the discussions about merging occur.

The issue of revenue generation versus cost savings in a consolidation between the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department is truly the key issue in this research. According to Commissioner Rambo (personal communication, April 4, 1999), the revenue provided by the County of Loudoun to a consolidated agency would decrease significantly from the total amounts provided to the two separate agencies. While it is possible that the funding algorithms could be altered, this should be complete prior to the discussions of consolidation to ensure a consistent revenue stream for the merged agency. Additionally, when compared to the cost savings that could be enjoyed by a consolidated agency, the drop in revenue does not balance with the savings that may be realized, which would result in an overall negative financial impact on the consolidated agency. Lastly, the leadership of both agencies involved are unsure about the financial impact of a consolidated fundraising program. The agencies currently do fundraising separately, and are uncertain if a single fundraising effort will generate the same amount of revenue as two separate initiatives. Should the revenue from fundraising decrease, it will also negatively affect the consolidated agency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department should not consolidate at present, however, the following issues are relevant to both agencies:

1. While consolidation is not recommended at present, the agencies may experience issues in the future that would make the consolidation of the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department more feasible, including funding changes and service delivery changes. The leadership of both agencies should keep the issue of consolidation as a future possibility for the two agencies.
2. The Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department should foster cooperative agreements and ventures between the organizations.
3. The leadership of the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department should keep open lines of communication between the agencies.
4. The leadership of the Sterling Park Rescue Squad and the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department should foster good relations between the members of the two agencies and create an atmosphere of cooperation.
5. The agencies should consider joint functions and agreements to prepare for a future consolidation, for example, consolidated public education activities, to enjoy cost-savings without a true consolidation of organizations.

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