

Running Head: REGIONALIZATION IN HOOD RIVER COUNTY

The Feasibility of Regionalizing Fire Services

in Hood River County, Oregon

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CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

Signed: _____

Abstract

The problem was the Hood River County Fire Services did not know if regionalization was feasible. It was uncertain as to what options existed and how regionalization may be accepted. The purpose of this research was to investigate if regionalization should be pursued in Hood River County. Descriptive research was used by conducting interviews and circulating a survey. A thorough literature review was also used to determine what functions could be considered for regionalization in Hood River County. Also analyzed was what barriers may exist and what benefits may be realized by regionalization in Hood River County.

The results of the research indicated that regionalization was feasible. Multiple functional areas were identified as high priorities for seeking regionalization. Even though the results indicated that regionalization should be pursued, many barriers to its effectiveness were also identified. Paying close attention to prevent barriers by maintaining open communications and retain the value of the volunteer fire service is important. Progress without concentrating on these potential barriers would result in negative outcomes. Finally, many benefits of regionalization were discovered. The literature review contained many examples of benefits that agencies across the nation have identified.

Recommendations were made to the Hood River County fire service to pursue county-wide training efforts and fire prevention functions. The research identified these two areas as the highest priority for further regionalization efforts. The recommendation was also made to ensure that there are open communications with all agencies involved and through all ranks of members. A follow-up report on any action taken to regionalize should be completed to ensure that these needs are being met.

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Introduction

Providing a high level of service to those that are in need has always been a goal of the fire service. Increased demand for emergency services, coupled with decreased financial stability and personnel availability has created a distinct challenge for today's fire service leaders. Hood River County fire services are faced with an increased call volume, diverse service requests, decreased personnel availability, and budgetary constraints. Cooperation among agencies is needed to provide the level of service expected from the citizens they protect. Regionalization is a way to provide that cooperation and protect the citizens. The problem is that Hood River County fire services do not know if regionalization is feasible. It is uncertain as to what options exist and how regionalization may be accepted.

The purpose of this research is to investigate if regionalization should be pursued in Hood River County. This paper will report the results of descriptive research, using interviews and questionnaires, along with a thorough literature review, to answer the following questions:

1. What functions could be considered for regionalization in Hood River County?
2. What barriers, if any, exist to regionalization in Hood River County?
3. What benefits can be realized from regionalization?

Background and Significance

Hood River County is located on the north-central border of Oregon, along the Columbia River and at the base of Mt. Hood. It is a County founded on agriculture and the timber industry that has transitioned to a bedroom community of Portland and highly attractive tourist destination. Commuters, both traditional and internet-based, find the proximity to Portland perfect for relaxed living that is close to the metropolitan city. Also, Hood River is home to world-class snow skiing, windsurfing, kite boarding, mountain biking, and kayaking, in addition to the traditional agricultural industries. The County is approximately 522 square miles and is home to over 25,000 permanent residents. Additionally, it has approximately 30 miles of interstate freeway, 100 miles of state highways, and has railroad traffic as well as river-barge traffic. This mix of commerce, industry, and recreation has made Hood River County one of the most popular places to visit and reside (Patrico, 2009).

The fire services in Hood River County started in 1904 when residents in the City of Hood River decided they needed organized fire protection. Over the next 50 years, six more fire agencies were added. The agencies were located evenly throughout the county, centered in populated areas. Two municipalities created departments, the City of Hood River and the City of Cascade Locks, while the remaining five areas formed special fire districts, Westside, Pine Grove, Odell, Dee, and Parkdale. The agencies were all volunteer and survived on tax dollars and donated funds. The traditional agricultural-based communities provided excellent staffing for the volunteer fire districts, while the municipal departments had many store owners and employees volunteering their time to protect the community. However, the change in industry focus from agriculture to tourism began in the 1980's. The wind that blew through the Columbia River Gorge became world famous for windsurfers, increasing the demand on the fire service.

The need for paid firefighters was realized first in the City of Hood River, where firefighters were hired and performed emergency dispatching functions for the entire County. Additional firefighters were soon added to operate the ambulance program. Throughout the county, changes in the availability of volunteers began to be noticed and requests for service, both emergency and non-emergency related, began to increase. By the mid-1990's, there were eight full time firefighters in the City of Hood River and a paid administrator in Odell and Westside Fire Districts. Also, mutual aid was being used for routine emergencies, once handled by individual districts. Regionalization was being utilized and some believed it needed to be taken to the next level. Without any research into the possibilities, a consultant was brought into the county to propose a complete County-wide consolidation. The proposal was met with intense resistance, with members from all agencies infuriated by the attempt to take away identities and community-based services. This first attempt at regionalization did extensive damage to personal and professional relationships and led to more hard feelings between agencies. In addition, it created a dislike for any type of formal regionalization.

However, in the year 2000, the Parkdale Fire District and the Dee Fire District completed a full merger, with Parkdale being the surviving agency. Also, due to increased calls and decreased staffing levels, an automatic aid system was implemented throughout the County. Agencies were now dispatched simultaneously to structure fires in each other's districts. Today, 5 of the 6 remaining fire agencies have a paid Fire Chief or administrator, while the remaining district contributes to the salary of a neighboring Fire Chief in exchange for services rendered.

Each fire agency in Hood River County co-exists with the others on a daily basis. For example, the City of Hood River provides Advanced Life Support (ALS) ambulance service to the majority of the County and is the only 24-hour per day staffed fire station, employing 16

career firefighters. Also, the Odell and Pine Grove fire Districts share a full time paid Chief and have quarterly joint Board meetings. The demands being placed on the administrators and the firefighters continues to increase and is a topic of conversation commonly heard in the fire stations.

Regionalization of services has been happening at various levels for many years. Talk of taking the next step continues to be commonplace, but there is no coordination of the effort and little understanding of the options available. Without this coordination or an understanding of options, the fire service in Hood River County will be prone to more growth problems and further difficulty in providing premier emergency services. For this reason, the Hood River County fire agencies will benefit from a study looking into feasible options for regionalization.

This applied research project will examine and identify options for regionalization, their feasibility, and the benefits that can be realized. Understandably, further regionalization will take substantial cultural change in all agencies involved. This directly relates to two of the terminal objectives of the Executive Development Course, Unit 7: Organizational Culture and Change which state "2. Recognize the indicators that point to a legitimate need for an organization's culture to change" and "4. Recognize that the Executive fire Officer (EFO) should be an agent of cultural organizational change" (United States Department of Homeland Security, 2006, p. SM 7-1). It further relates to the objective of Unit 10: Service Quality which states "The students will recognize the importance of quality in the fire service and the role of the Executive Fire Officer (EFO) in encouraging quality" (United States Department of Homeland Security, 2006, p SM 10-1). Finally, by studying ways to "develop and enhance the effectiveness of the fire service," this research relates to three goals of the U.S. Fire Administration: Goal 2: Improve Local Planning and Preparedness, Goal 3: Improve the Fire

and Emergency Services' Capability for Response to and Recovery from All Hazards, and Goal 4: Improve the Fire and Emergency Services' Professional Status (United States Fire Administration [USFA], 2009, p. iii). Each of these goals is affected by cooperation and collaboration, both of which are part of regionalization efforts.

Literature Review

The fire service has been using various forms of regionalization for many years. The first formal efforts began in the 1970's, but did not gain national interest until the 1990's. The western states, including Oregon, "began to see these actions as viable alternatives for sustaining their fire departments" (Legislative Budget and Finance Committee [LBFC], 2005, p. 34). Because of these first efforts, the LBFC (2005) reports the following:

Nationally, "regionalization" (i.e., regional partnerships and other forms of cooperative service agreements among fire companies) has proven to be an effective means of dealing with increasing service demands, rising costs, and scarce resources. Fire companies in all parts of the country are increasingly turning to a variety of joint ventures to deal with funding and staffing problems and improve service and service levels in their jurisdictions (p. S-10).

Many different types of regionalization exist and are used in today's fire service. Mutual aid, automatic aid, joint powers agreements, consolidation, and fire/EMS authorities are but a few. Coleman (2008) explains regionalization in three distinct levels: cooperation, collaboration, and consolidation. Each level increases the formality of agreements. He explains that "cooperation is when two organizations decide that they can do something together that neither of them can do successfully on their own" (p. 31). Examples of this are mutual and automatic aid agreements, used to assist each other for emergency response purposes.

Cooperation is often something that is in place, but rarely identified as a regionalization effort. Coleman continues to explain that collaboration is when each agency decides to invest in activities, while maintaining their individual organization. This may include joint ventures such as shared employees or a regional training facility. These practices bring legal issues into the equation, resulting in more formalized agreements. Finally, the highest level of commitment is consolidation. Coleman explains that consolidation is when agencies give up their individual identities and become one entity (p. 31). This is the most formal type of regionalization and takes the most effort to accomplish. This is often met with resistance if not handled properly.

The difficulty that exists in considering regionalization is the loss of ownership and the perceived lack of individuality by organizations and firefighters that are not being included in the decision making process. This was the leading cause of a consolidation effort failing in Pennsylvania. A variety of factors led to the dismantling of a consolidation committee because issues of control, existing equipment, and changes to policies and by-laws were not addressed adequately (LBFC, 2005, p. 66). This is a detractor for many people that do not fully understand the regionalization process. Consolidation is not an end all solution. It is a method or process that demands organizations to work together and have open communication (Coleman, 2008).

Prince William County, Virginia, went through the process of studying regionalization. In a recent article about the process, the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) spoke out concerning the lack of coordination with the local volunteer fire companies. Dave Finger, the Director of Government Relations for the NVFC, said the overhaul that was taking place "erodes the whole culture of the volunteer fire system." He continued by discussing how not having "autonomy" created a "loss of control" (Mack, 2009). This is a common fear among all agencies, paid and volunteer. The loss of local control is an important concern to address.

These are the same types of concerns that are raised from non-fire agencies when looking into regionalization. A manual created in Pennsylvania by the Governor's Office reports that two of the main arguments against consolidation of police services are the loss of local non-enforcement services and the loss of local control (Governor's Center for Local Government Services, 2002). Police Officers tend to do many related duties such as collecting parking meter money, delivering messages between municipal officials, and running errands. However, when a large regionalization occurs, some of the duties are no longer handled by the officers, forcing the municipalities to make up the difference. Also, local control over the day-to-day operations of the police force is removed. This creates a feeling of less control for municipal managers (p. 5).

Being careful to keep people involved at the right level and with the correct information is a requirement for any type of successful regionalization. Coleman (2008) summarized the need for this type of involvement by saying:

When the word consolidation comes up in conversation, the initial reaction is almost always negative. That is because it is introduced as an end result rather than a process of understanding. Examining the facts must be the first step of any consolidation effort. If a consolidation is handled by extremists, regardless of their point of view, it is almost always doomed to failure...The best-cased scenario is that over time two organizations begin to know each other so well that they ultimately decide that it is in their best interest to join (p. 30).

Understanding that there are obstacles to clear on the path to regionalization is important. It is not something that happens overnight. It also does not mean that there will automatically be one large department covering the entire county. In San Diego County, the need for regionalization was recognized. Multiple fire departments and districts were located throughout

the County, causing difference in service levels. Jacob (2004, p. 1) recognized the need to create a "seamless blanket of coverage" to alleviate gaps in those service levels. She believed that regionalization would help manage the existing resources and facilitate consistency related to fire codes and regulations. Wildfires in her county arbitrarily decide which jurisdiction to burn. They do not give consideration to the level of service that a jurisdiction provides. The regionalization of fire services in San Diego County would start a new time of coordination. It was her goal to make the San Diego region safer from fire and regionalization was very important to that promise (Jacob, 2004, p. 2). Public safety and firefighter wellbeing are paramount when making those choices.

The fragmented service levels in San Diego County are not unique. In fact, they have become a national area of concern to the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC). An investigation into the status of the American volunteer fire service was conducted and a report was published outlining the committee's concerns and suggested solutions. The Blue Ribbon Report identifies that local entities must use mutual aid to compensate for deficiencies in services. This concept allows communities to receive a higher level of service than can be provided by its own agency. The report also suggests that states need to promote regional service delivery to help make up for these deficiencies (Buckman, et al., 2004). State-wide promotion of regionalization can be through training, prevention services, and organized incident management teams. Specifically, the report says that regionalization needs to be utilized while providing specialized services like water rescue, hazardous materials response, and technical rescue (p. 12). These services are often unable to be funded or staff by each individual agency. Adding regionalization to specialized services is a way to provide the service while maintaining

current service levels. Fragmented or ineffective operations can be repaired by utilizing appropriate regionalization practices.

Oregon is taking the lead in another area of regionalization, attempting to decrease the fragmentation that exists in competitive bidding for major purchases. The League of Oregon Cities (LOC) has established numerous contracts with national and regional product vendors to help reduce the cost to local agencies (Busch and Grindle, 2009). These contracts save local agencies many dollars by securing national-tier level pricing. An additional benefit to these contracts is the use of them for "piggybacking" by not only LOC members, but other governments across the country. Piggybacking allows local entities to avoid the costly and time consuming process of issuing Request for Proposals (RFP) and reviewing bids (p. 86). It also advocates inter-agency communication and improvements in the design of equipment purchased. This effort to regionalize helps government agencies reduce costs in a time of strict financial management.

In Eugene and Springfield, Oregon, the Fire Chiefs are interested in moving forward with another type of regionalization. The plan is to operate under an intergovernmental agreement (IGA) for a few years to see if the two departments' administrations can work as one entity. If the agreement works and the departments are happy with the arrangement, they plan to discuss a full merger (Damewood, 2009). The two cities, separated only by an interstate freeway, have been working together for years and are now ready to move forward with additional agreements.

This was also how the Willamette Valley Fire and Rescue Authority in Marion County, Oregon was formed. Two agencies began sharing their Fire Chief for a trial period. Following the informal agreement, the two fire districts completed an intergovernmental agreement and formed a regional fire authority in 2008 (Willamette Valley Fire and Rescue, n.d.). Each fire

district maintains a separate identity, yet cooperatively works under one administrative body. This is an example of a functional consolidation, allowing local control, but benefiting from regionalization. Each agency has seen an increase in efficiency and a reduction in insurance rates.

These types of regionalization are happening all over the United States due to the benefits realized. The LBFC (2005) research in Pennsylvania identified an extensive list of benefits of regionalization. They also reviewed multiple case studies and reports of regionalization efforts throughout Pennsylvania, compiling a list of benefits that have resulted from the efforts. The main areas the study identified were as follows: (a) improved recruitment and retention of personnel, (b) improved relationships with municipal departments, (c) more efficient equipment and facility use, (d) standardized requirements, (e) improved accountability in the budgetary process, (f) better response times, (g) efficiencies in training and administrative structures, (h) reduced need for fundraising, (i) more complete planning processes, and (j) more efficient use of resources (p. 71-73).

Each of the listed benefits was justified with multiple examples. Recruitment and retention of volunteers was accomplished by larger length of service award programs, an improved reputation in the county, and additional incentive programs that were offered. Municipal government relationships improved because of streamlined communications with department officials. Equipment and facilities use was made more efficient and enabled the area to make maintenance decisions based on a larger pool of resources (p. 71). The creation of a regional department helped to standardize the requirements of each individual department, leading to a better working relationship between various fire chiefs. The budget was held more

accountable and the use of a multi-year capitalization plan helped absorb costs that typically caused budgetary constraints.

The coverage and response times improved because of the efforts also, eliminating boundary lines and allowing service to be rendered by the closest available unit. Training was coordinated throughout the region, without duplications and inconsistencies. It also added depth to the leadership ranks of the department. The administrative structure was streamlined, utilizing available resources to end duplication of efforts (p. 72). The LBFC also reported that there was a reduced need for fundraising due to the efficient management of a single budget. Duplication of purchases and the addition of joint decision making helped reduce the financial burden of the individual entities. They were able to maintain a more open communication system in terms of planning, both operationally and strategically. Finally, the bottom line was more effective use of available resources in the county, which improved firefighter safety, customer service, and funding opportunities (p. 73).

Each of these benefits was realized due to open communications and a willingness to improve customer service. Agencies that are willing to work together have to start at whatever level of regionalization at which they are currently operating. Communication on a daily basis, coupled with candid day-to-day exchanges of information make regionalization efforts happen (Coleman, 2008). Increased state and federal mandates are making it more difficult to function independently. It also makes it more difficult to attract new volunteers since they see an increasing time commitment to meet training and certification standards. No matter how the regionalization effort begins, the most important matter is that "egos are being set aside and decisions are being made with the end user in mind" (Jensen and Snook, 2000). This was reiterated in an Executive Fire Officer Applied Research paper on functional consolidation.

Nichols (2006) indicated that his research had concluded that consolidation was a needed part of the vocabulary in South Central Pennsylvania and that the days of individual operations were gone.

Extensive research has been done on regionalization efforts. States have convened committees to look into the possibilities, local agencies have developed their own forms of regionalization, and industry experts have offered guidance on various topics. Coleman (2003) mentions that economies of scale can be achieved if regionalization efforts are done correctly. Economies of scale happen when two or more programs are applied together, resulting in an increase in their output or efficiencies. Political bodies need to decide what the community can protect on its own and what it can do if it combines with another agency. If combining gives better coverage or more efficient operations, then the regionalization should happen since an economy of scale could be achieved (Coleman, 2003).

This literature has shown that there are significant steps being taken toward regionalization of fire services throughout the United States. These steps are not often recognized as regionalization, but are definite acts of cooperation, such as mutual and automatic aid agreements. The Pennsylvania General Assembly, along with numerous industry experts, has identified regionalization as a feasible means of enhancing the fire service (LBFC, 2005, p. 34). However, there are many cautions that have been mentioned, to include open and proper communications and stakeholder awareness. The literature indicates that regionalization is a practice that has been occurring since the 1990's and will continue to progress. It is becoming commonplace and will continue to take hold (Coleman, 2008). Ultimately, the U.S. Fire Administration recognizes regionalization as a solution to keeping the fire service as efficient

and effective as possible. In fact, three out of five of their goals in their 2009-2013 Strategic Plan are related to cooperation between agencies and community-wide planning (USFA, 2009).

Procedures

The first part of this research project was a comprehensive literature review. The research included a review of past Executive Fire Officer research papers and various state committee research reports. It continued with an extensive search of internet-cataloged literature and current periodical reviews. Much of the literature review was completed by May 2009, with continued investigation into August 2009.

Research was conducted by using the Google search engine and search engines located on industry website homepages. Terms such as consolidation, regionalization, fire service merger, fire authority, and regional fire service were used to locate resources. Only documents with a publication date of less than ten years old were used, primarily trying to stay within the past 5 years. The purpose of the literature review was to find background information and past relevant research on the types of regionalization that are being used across the nation, what barriers other areas have found when considering regionalization, and what benefits have been derived from regionalization in other parts of the country.

The second part of the research involved conducting a survey with area fire chiefs. Since Hood River County is small and only has six fire departments, with five fire chiefs and a full time Fire Marshal, the survey had a very limited population. The survey was focused directly on Hood River County agencies, so expanding to outside agencies was not chosen. This was done to ensure the comments that were received were based only on current Hood River situations and behaviors, increasing the relevance of the survey results to our County's situation. Of the five surveys circulated, four were returned, resulting in an 80% return rate. The purpose of the

survey was to determine the level of understanding about regionalization, what types of functions the county fire chiefs feel can be regionalized, what perceived barriers exist in the county, and what topics need to be addressed in order for regionalization to progress. The survey questions were created by listing common questions that the researcher had heard from personal communications and from reviewing other Executive Fire Officer surveys that had been done for similar research papers.

Lastly, an interview was conducted with Jim Trammell to gain a better feel for his perception of the local situation. Mr. Trammell is the Fire Marshal for the Westside Fire District, the only paid employee in a department of 50 volunteers. He is also the Hood River County Defense Chief, responsible to the Oregon State Fire Marshal's office for all major events in the county. He originated from the California Department of Forestry (now CalFire) and was instrumental in the adoption and use of the incident command system in California. He has vast experience of working in and with organizations that have experienced regionalization and understands both paid and volunteer fire service functions. The purpose of the interview was to further answer questions about barriers to regionalization that exist in the county and what priorities for future consideration should be set.

Results

Using descriptive research methods, this researcher was able to find sufficient information to answer the research questions posed. The survey results and the interview also provided background information relating to the understanding of regionalization.

The first survey question dealt with what types of regionalization the person taking the survey was familiar with. The results showed that all survey participants knew about consolidation, merger, mutual aid, and automatic aid. However, only two respondents had heard

of fire authorities. None of the respondents had heard of EMS authorities. One of the participants offered an additional type of regionalization by writing in "intergovernmental agreements or contracts."

The second and third survey questions dealt with whether or not the respondents had heard of, or been part of, a regionalization effort. Only 50% of the survey takers marked that they had heard of a regionalization project or been part of one. A comment written concerning this was that they knew that Parkdale and Dee Fire Districts had merged, but they did not consider it a major regionalization effort. One respondent wrote in that they knew about the City of The Dalles and Wasco Rural Fire District merger and multiple mergers in California. The first three questions of the survey were used to establish how much understanding of regionalization exists among the chiefs in Hood River County.

The next two questions of the survey provided answers to the first research question: "What functions could be considered for regionalization in Hood River County?" The survey results showed that 100% of the chiefs feel that training and fire prevention services could be investigated further. Three out of four chiefs feel that operations could be looked at and 50% feel that group purchasing could be studied. One out of the four felt that administration could be looked into. Of those five functional areas that the chiefs felt could be considered, the top priority, agreed upon by all respondents, was regionalizing the training function. This was followed by fire prevention, operations, and group purchasing.

Question number six of the survey provided answers to the second research question: "What barriers, if any, exist to regionalization in Hood River County?" Three of the four surveys returned with comments stating that personal pride and ownership in their individual department would be a barrier to further regionalization. Another comment that was made was the

separation of paid versus volunteer firefighters and how that relationship would be managed. Other comments related to funding issues, management structure, and the justification of the need for change to the constituents of the fire district. One final comment was made about the disparity in the strictness of the requirements and training needs of the various departments.

The final question of the survey also helped to answer the research question about barriers. When asked what topics needed to be addressed before movement towards formal regionalization was pursued, multiple responses were written. The typical response that most respondents wrote echoed not losing volunteer firefighters. Exact comments included: "Is there going to be volunteers or are they going to be replaced by paid career or combination of both?" "The full knowledge and understanding that volunteerism is the key to providing our service," "Well planned out guidelines with big regards to not losing volunteers," and "The importance of blending and molding limited paid personnel with volunteers." The remaining responses were varied, ranging from dealing with the management structure and who will be in charge, to not having the ambulance service being involved and combining strategies and tactics in training. Overall, the main barriers that the respondents felt existed were loss of ownership and differences in paid versus volunteer status. Others were listed, but these were the main focus.

Finally, the respondents were given the opportunity to write comments on the back of the survey. One survey came back with additional written comments relating to regionalization. The comment began by stating "I think this is a great topic to be looking into. For most people, I don't think they realize that they are on the edge of not complying due to lack of personnel." The comments continued and addressed topics such as compliance with national and state standards, volunteer ownership in their programs, and the lack of personnel available for staffing.

The researcher also conducted a personal interview with Jim Trammell which resulted in many answers to the research questions also. When asked about his opinions regarding regionalization, Mr. Trammell stated that "to make changes happen, you either have to educate people or show them that the service is not working." He said this is usually done when a firefighter loses their life or a large structure is destroyed because no one showed up to fight the fire. However, he said those problems do not exist in Hood River County. "We have a county that is well staffed and well equipped. We do not have a problem with emergency response at this time."

While discussing the final research question "What benefits can be realized by regionalization", Mr. Trammell replied that we have already seen the benefits of this in the form of our mutual and automatic aid agreements. "It used to be that you had to beg another jurisdiction to come help, now we get them automatically." He told a story of when he was a Battalion Chief in California and had a structure fire in an 8,000 square foot home. His entire crew for the fire consisted of four firefighters. Without mutual aid agreements, he had to virtually beg a neighboring district to come help at the fire. "The fire service of today is much different" he said, referring to mutual aid agreements. This interview, combined with the literature review showed that there are benefits to regionalization and many of them are being done without recognition.

Another topic of the interview was the paid versus volunteer discrepancy. He said it is difficult for a volunteer to be reprimanded or told to do something by a paid firefighter, because of the status differences. "Volunteers do not like to be punished by a 'paid guy.' They take to reprimands much easier if it comes from a volunteer." He referred to the way his department, the Westside Fire District, is organized. He is the only paid staffer and ends up doing much of the

administrative work, always with permission from the volunteer Fire Chief. However, when it comes to disciplinary actions, the volunteer Chief handles those situations to stay clear from any type of conflict. This information also helps to answer the research question concerning the barriers that exist to regionalization.

The final question asked in the interview was about the consolidation meeting that happened in the late 1990's in Hood River County. When asked about the outcome of the meeting and why it caused such uneasiness in the county he replied "because nobody knew why it needed to happen. There was no problem identified before hand, so those that attended were wondering why there was a need change." He explained that when people enter into any type of discussion with a negative attitude, all you will get back out of the meeting is negativity. He believes there should have been more upfront work done before the meeting to prevent an uneducated crowd from being hostile towards the concept.

Discussion

The literature review and the research results support the fact that there are functions of the fire service in Hood River County that could be regionalized. Benefits were identified in both sources, however, many barriers were also identified that need to be addressed in the process. The research identified that a slight misunderstanding or confusion exists on the topic of regionalization. This is apparent in the response to the survey questions regarding with what types of regionalization the chiefs were familiar. Some responses indicated that they had not been part of, or aware of, any regionalization efforts, when in fact we have had a consolidation of two fire districts in our own County.

The research demonstrated that there were many areas that could be considered for further regionalization in Hood River County. The top priority of these functions was identified

as training. The regional training function can be in a cooperation format as discussed by Coleman (2008). Working together on training, holding joint training drills, and combining training schedules are all examples of this. A larger step is to utilize a county-wide training officer, paid for by all agencies involved. This is an example of collaboration, where separate agencies have some kind of investment into a program (Coleman, 2008). Increased demands on volunteer firefighters make it difficult to train and retain them. Having a consistent training program makes regionalizing the training function attractive.

The regional approach to training fits with the provision of mutual aid and automatic aid in those aiding agencies are trained to the same standards. The Blue Ribbon Report, published by the Volunteer and Combination Officers Section of the IAFC, recognizes that regional service delivery is an important aspect of the fire service. The report suggests that state-wide support be promoted in the areas of training, prevention, and incident management (Buckman, et al., 2004).

The literature review identified that economies of scale are met when regions begin working with each other (Coleman, 2003). The responses in the research indicated that training is a need in the County and that prevention services were not far behind. The research indicates that each agency is in need of a training officer. However, each individual agency hiring training staff would be counter-intuitive. Economies of scale can be achieved by the regional hiring of a training staff to deliver a consistent program throughout the county. The research supported what was written concerning economies of scale.

The research also revealed that group purchasing is an interest for possible regionalization efforts. An article by Busch and Grindle (2009) on group purchasing supported this possibility. The League of Oregon Cities established a program, much like the Fire-Rescue GPO program, to enable entities to "piggyback" on other purchases. This saves time and money

for all agencies involved. In the fiscal climate that we are currently in, saving money and being more fiscally responsible is an important focus of administrators.

The research identified multiple barriers that exist to the expansion of regionalization efforts in Hood River County. The researcher identified volunteer pride and ownership as the most important concern that has to be addressed at all stages during regionalization. This was seen in Prince William County, Pennsylvania while efforts to regionalize the fire service were occurring. The National Volunteer Fire Council voiced their concern over volunteers losing autonomy and local control in the process (Mack, 2009). The same concern was reported in research done by the Governor's Center for Local Government Services (2002) on regionalizing police services. Local control was diminished, creating unrest in those that are used to having control.

Another barrier that was identified in the research was poor communication while conducting regionalization efforts. The interview with Mr. Trammell explained that in the late 1990's the county experienced this when consultants were hired to discuss consolidation on a county level. Poor communication beforehand led to negative attitudes arriving at the meeting. The literature also supported this concept as was also the case in Pennsylvania when a consolidation committee was dismantled due to poor communications (LBFC, 2005, p. 66). Coleman (2008) mentioned that regionalization work demands open communications. It involves a process and cannot be presented as an end result. Organizations must work well with each other in order for regionalization to move forward (p. 30).

Multiple benefits were identified in the literature review that correlated with comments found in the research. The LBFC (2005) research indicated that regionalization, has proven to be effective in dealing with decreased staffing levels and increased service demands (p. S-10). This

is apparent to the researcher in the comments made by Mr. Trammell concerning the current mutual aid and automatic aid agreements. All is working well in the county, mainly due to the existing agreements. Commonly, these existing mutual aid agreements are being expanded into further regionalization efforts.

For example, the Eugene and Springfield, Oregon, fire departments are a prime example of making good, better. In a recent newspaper article, the Fire Chiefs from both departments stated that they had been working together for years and were prepared to move to the next level (Damewood, 2009). They are pursuing an intergovernmental agreement for joint administration of the two fire agencies. This is how the Willamette Valley Fire and Rescue Authority was created. Two agencies shared a Fire Chief for a trial period and then created an IGA that formed a regional fire authority (Willamette Valley Fire and Rescue, n.d.).

The research and literature review proved to the researcher that regionalization is feasible in Hood River County, as long as the barriers are addressed as they are met. Regionalization is a common topic of discussion in all parts of the country and the days of individual operations are gone (Nichols, 2006). The research agrees with the statements of Jacob (2004) concerning the need to make a "seamless blanket of coverage." The existing aid agreements in Hood River County are a first step of cooperation toward that coverage.

This research has shown that there are substantial opportunities to grow regionally in Hood River County, increasing the effectiveness of the service provided and the cooperation between agencies. It has also identified that there needs to be order, consistency, and open communications at all levels during any regionalization processes that take place in the future.

Recommendations

The results of the research and literature review identify that regionalization is feasible in Hood River County. Many functions are already regionalized and are in fine working condition. Aid agreements are in place, communication regarding desires and trends are open between chief officers, and a general attitude of working together exists. The slight lack of understanding concerning regionalization can be alleviated by a short discussion at a future Chief's Association meeting.

The following recommendations are made for Hood River County in regards to regionalization:

1. Two functions should be considered for regionalization. County-wide training efforts should be pursued. There is ample interest in some type of program surrounding a regional approach to training. Also, the County fire services should investigate the use of a regional fire prevention person. This service can create consistent fire code enforcement throughout the County, eliminating potential conflicts. Consideration should be given to whether or not one person can do both jobs. Investigation into a combined person for this position would be a responsible approach.
2. Involvement of all interested agencies and representatives from all ranks and members need to be included. Open communication is a key to the success of these programs. This will also help to decrease the potential for barriers to exist and efforts to be terminated. Consideration should be given to the main barriers listed in the results section of this research paper.

3. Following the implementation of any additional regionalized services, a review cycle should be established to measure the benefits and detriments of the action. This will be the only way to analyze if regionalization efforts are beneficial. It will also help to eliminate potential barriers from growing.

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Appendix A: Survey Cover Letter

July 20, 2009

To: Hood River County Fire Chiefs

From: Devon Wells

RE: EFO Research Questionnaire

Chiefs – I am involved in the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer's (EFO) Program. One of the requirements is to complete a 6-month research project that relates to our previous course taken. I will be completing four research projects by the year 2013.

This year, I have chosen to do a study on "Regionalization of Fire Services in Hood River County." The stated problem is that the Hood River County Fire Districts do not know if regionalization is feasible. The purpose of the research is to determine if regionalization should be pursued in Hood River County. Research questions that I will answer are: 1) What functions could be considered for regionalization in Hood River County, 2) What barriers, if any, exist to regionalization in Hood River County, and 3) What benefits can be realized from regionalization.

I hope to have four years of research on this topic when I am completed with the EFO program. As part of the research, I completed a thorough literature review and background information study. This is followed by an applied research section, mainly consisting of interviews and questionnaires. This is where I need your assistance.

The enclosed questionnaire will take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete, depending on your willingness to expound on your comments. Please help me with this research project and complete the questionnaire. I will contact you in the next week to pick it up from you and ask a few interview questions.

Thank you for your time and help with this project,

Devon Wells

Hood River Fire Dept.

Appendix B: Survey

Hood River County Regionalization Study

Questionnaire

1. What types of regionalization have you heard of?

- Consolidation
- Merger
- Fire Authority
- EMS Authority
- Mutual Aid
- Automatic Aid
- Functional Consolidation
- Administrative Consolidation
- Other

2. Do you know of other fire agencies that have done a major regionalization project? If yes, who?

- Yes, _____
- No

3. Have you ever been involved in a regionalization project?

- Yes, please describe _____
- No

4. What functions could be regionalized in Hood River County?

- Operations
- Administration
- Fire Prevention/Fire Marshal Services
- Training
- Group Purchasing
- Other _____

5. Of the functions listed above, what should the top three priorities be when considering regionalization in Hood River County?

- NONE
- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

6. What barriers do you feel exist to regionalization in Hood River County?

7. When considering regionalization, what topics are important to you that need to be addressed before any movement towards formal regionalization can be pursued?

Thank you for your time! Additional comments may be added to the back of the sheet.