Importance of Strategic Planning

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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 is that the King George County, Department of Fire, Rescue, and Emergency Services (KGFRES) has no strategic plan, which in turn has created a department that mainly has addressed issues in their present state and has been based primarily on reaction.

The purpose of this applied research project was to identify the elements that would be involved in developing a strategic plan and how a strategic plan would be implemented within the KGFRES. A descriptive research method was used to answer seven questions:

1. Why is strategic planning critical in any organization?
2. How have other fire and rescue organizations implemented strategic planning?
3. How have private sector businesses incorporated strategic planning?
4. Who should be involved in strategic planning within our organization?
5. How many years should our strategic plan target for?
6. What key elements should strategic plan encompass?
7. What is our organization hoping to gain with having a strategic plan?

Procedures involved an extensive literature review, a review of departmental procedures, reports, and departmental surveying. This applied research project contained a 5-step process, in order to define what strategic planning is, how others have incorporated strategic planning, what were the key elements of a strategic plan, and how should the KGFRES incorporate strategic planning. The fifth step was surveying various members within the KGFRES to include; volunteers, county paid fire and rescue employees, supervisory company officers and chief officers. Results of the literature review verified a clear need for the KGFRES to develop and implement a departmental strategic plan. A strategic plan would provide a road map for the
Recommendations were provided for the establishment of a planning team and to provide a model to develop and implement a 5-year strategic plan for the department.
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INTRODUCTION

Strategic planning serves as a vital component to any organization, whether being a large corporation, non-profit agency, state / local government, or a fire department. A strategic plan will identify the strengths and weakness, while providing a road map as to where an organization is going. Developing a strategic plan is an important part of a fire department’s evolutionary process. Throughout the nation fire departments have operated for many years without having strategic plans for their organization. As communities have grown, the need for more complex fire departments have been required to adapt to the changing culture and environment. Due to this change it is important to not operate from crisis to crisis in a reactionary mode rather than a proactive mode.

The problem is that the King George County Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services (KGFRES) department has no strategic plan. This in turn has created a department that mainly addresses issues in their present state and has been based primarily on reaction.

The purpose of this research is to identify what elements would be involved in developing a strategic plan and how a strategic plan would be implemented within the King George County Department of Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services (KGFRES). Descriptive research was used to answer seven questions:

1. Why is strategic planning critical in any organization?
2. How have other fire and rescue organizations implemented strategic planning?
3. How have private sector businesses incorporated strategic planning?
4. Who should be involved in strategic planning within our organization?
5. How many years should our strategic plan target for?

6. What key elements should strategic plan encompass?

7. What is our organization hoping to gain with having a strategic plan?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

King George County is located in the northeastern region of Virginia and is considered to be the gateway to the Northern Neck. King George is predominately a rural community that encompasses 182 square miles and a population of approximately 25,000. Over the past 10 years King George has started to see a transition from all rural to a community of residential subdivisions and various commercial and industrial developments. King George saw itself on the nation’s growth radar when its population increased 6.7 percent between 2004 and 2005, which reflected the ninth fastest-growing county in the country for that year. In addition, the county is expected to grow between 20 to 30 percent over the next 25 years, according to estimates from the Virginia Employment Commission.

The county is currently protected by a combination paid and volunteer department that operates out of one headquarters fire station, two fire sub-stations and one rescue station. The department is organized with a County Fire & Rescue Chief, a County Deputy Fire & Rescue Chief, a Volunteer Deputy Chief, an Operations Captain, a Training Officer Captain, a Lieutenant - Fire Inspector / Investigator, a Lieutenant - Deputy Emergency Management Coordinator, a Senior Administrative Assistant, an Emergency Management Planner, 19 Full-Time Firefighters, 12 Part-Time Firefighters, 70 Active Volunteer Firefighters, and a Ladies Auxiliary. The department provides the following services to the community: fire suppression, fire prevention, injury prevention, basic and advanced emergency medical ambulance service, hazardous materials, emergency management, community mass notification, fire code enforcement, plan
reviews, public fire education, technical vehicle rescue, and water rescue. In 2009 the department responded to over 3,100 Fire and EMS emergencies, which included 415 fires, over 1800 EMS ambulance calls, and over 700 calls where both a fire apparatus and ambulance response was necessary. The department conducted over 1,600 transports to the hospital while caring for the sick and injured, landed 26 air – medical helicopters, responded to 198 motor vehicle accidents (MVA), 11 water rescues, and 30 structure fires with 2 fatalities.

Throughout the years, King George has been blessed with having volunteers within the community to provide fire and rescue services. On August 14, 1946 twenty-five men and women met in the auditorium of the King George Courthouse to organize the first King George Volunteer Fire Department (KGVFD). In 1954 volunteers within community to provide rescue and emergency medical services throughout the county created the Dahlgren Rescue Squad (DRS). This organization became one of the leading EMS agencies in the region and was the first to provide advanced life support services and was the first to hire paid EMS providers in region. In 1966 a fire sub-station was established in the Fairview Beach area of the county and was to become known as the Fairview Beach Volunteer Fire Department (FBVFD), but in 2000 the FBVFD and KGVFD both had merged organizations due to administrative issues, fiscal mismanagement, personnel concerns and political pressure within the FBVFD. Due to this merger, it was decided that the newly combined fire department would be named the King George Fire & Rescue, Inc. (KGFR).

In 1999 King George County created the Department of Emergency Services (DES) and brought the four paid paramedics and one paid firefighter under this department. These five individuals were intended to supplement the volunteer rescue squad and fire department during daytime hours. As the needs of the county continued to increase the department grew and in
2003 paid personnel began supplementing the volunteer organizations on a 24-hour daily basis (KGFRES SOP, 2008)

In 2001 the county requested the assistance of the Virginia Department of Fire Programs (VDFP) and the Virginia Office of Emergency Medical Services (OEMS) to conduct a study to evaluate the county’s fire and rescue services. This study evaluated the following:

1. Management, administration, and accountability
2. Level of service
3. Personnel
4. Training
5. Safety and operations
6. Apparatus and equipment

Many recommendations were provided to improve and enhance the county’s fire and rescue services. In 2005 the Dahlgren Rescue Squad and King George Fire & Rescue merged. This merger was due to consolidation of resources, reduce overlapping costs, address operational shortfalls, combine volunteer membership, share duties, etc. This merger was hard to accept for many of the volunteers because of the personal emotions that went along with being a volunteer and having to become part of something new. In October of 2008, the King George County Board of Supervisors passed an ordinance establishing the King George County, Department of Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services (KGFRES). This department united the paid and volunteer fire and rescue organizations into one operational entity with one clearly defined mission, line of authority and chain of command. Throughout the years and through volunteer mergers, consolidation of fire and EMS operations, and combining the volunteers with the paid county fire / EMS employees, a need for a county fire and rescue strategic plan has been overdue. This
planning process is critical in order to identify our organization’s long-range mission, goals, and objectives and proposals for achieving those objectives. By not embracing the concept of strategic planning in our department, we will continue to only plan for and address issues in their present state and not for the future. This process is critical for any organization, but even more important for a public safety organization that is built on public trust and tasked with the responsibility for being prepared to mitigate emergencies when they occur (KGFRES SOP, 2008).

This applied research project was undertaken to determine why strategic planning is important to an organization, how has other fire and rescue organizations implemented strategic planning, how has private businesses incorporated strategic planning, who should be involved in strategic planning within our organization, how many years should our plan target for, what key elements should the plan encompass, and what is our organization hoping to gain with having a strategic plan? This applied research project has significant impact to the National Fire Academy’s (NFA) Executive Development course by enhancing the skills needed for and Executive Fire Officer to analyze, lead and incorporate change within their department (NFA Executive Development, Student Manual 3rd Edition). This research project also relates to and supports the United States Fire Administration (USFA) Objective number three; “to respond appropriately in a timely manner to emerging issues,” (USFA, 2001, p. II-2). In addition, the results of this research will be utilized to create the strategic planning process for the King George County Department of Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services. This outcome will contribute to a more effective and efficient department.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Research was collected from various materials and sources including, the National Fire Academy Learning Resource Center, the Smoot Public Library, International of City Managers Association – Managing Fire and Rescue Services, International of Association Fire Chiefs, subject-matter experts in strategic planning in both public and private sectors, and the World Wide Web. Throughout this project I was able to research various reports, articles, journals, books, Executive Fire Officer Applied Research Projects and other fire and rescue department’s planning processes regarding strategic planning. During my research I found that there are various models and templates in order to incorporate strategic planning within an organization, both in the public and private sectors. This section will identify important information in order to answer the following:

1. Why is strategic planning critical in any organization?
2. How have other fire and rescue organizations implemented strategic planning?
3. How have private sector businesses incorporated strategic planning?
4. Who should be involved in strategic planning within our organization?
5. How many years should our strategic plan target for?
6. What key elements should strategic plan encompass?
7. What is our organization hoping to gain with having a strategic plan?

The meaning of strategic planning can be defined as the process of determining what an organization wants to be in the future and how it will get there. The route word in strategic planning is strategy and is defined in three ways by Merriam – Webster’s Online Dictionary (2010) as the following:
1. “The science and art of employing the political, economic, psychological, and military forces of a nation or group of nations to afford the maximum support to adopted policies in peace or war.”

2. “A careful plan or method: a clever stratagem, the art of devising or employing plans or stratagems toward a goal.”

3. “An adaptation or complex of adaptations (as of behavior, metabolism, or structure) that serves or appears to serve an important function in achieving evolutionary success.”

According to the International Association of Fire Chief’s the development of a strategic plan is an important aspect of a fire department’s evolutionary process. It has been stated that fire chiefs who incorporate strategic planning in their department are better able to predict and manage changes more successfully. It will allow a fire department to think strategically and develop effective strategies, provide clarification on future direction establish priorities, solve major departmental problems, improve overall department performance, deal with rapidly changing circumstances, develop a basis for decision making, and build teamwork (Wallace, 2006, p. 7). Strategic planning for fire departments requires commitment amongst all chief officers, the localities chief operating officer (i.e. City Manager, County Administrator, Town Administrator, etc.), elected officials, and the leaders throughout the community. A strategic planning team’s size can vary depending on the size of the organization, but regardless of size the planning team should be well diversified and should include all of the major stakeholders. An example of this diversification could include the following:

1. Fire Chief

2. Chief officers (i.e. Division Chief, EMS Chief, Technical Service Chief, etc.)
3. City / County administration representative  
4. Elected official representative  
5. Private industry representatives  
6. Non-supervisory firefighter  
7. Member from a neighboring fire department  
8. Volunteer fire department representative  
9. EMS representative

In summary, when developing our strategic planning team it is important that we remember and as a general rule of thumb that we will want to include anyone in the community that can take away or alter the department’s mission. Establishing this team and ensuring we have the right stakeholders will prove to be critical and will allow for support and buy-in throughout the planning process. Developing such a plan without involving our community and stakeholders will surely lessen the chances for success.

According to Mark Wallace, author of *Fire Department Strategic Planning*, the strategic planning team should develop answers for the following questions:

1. How much commitment is there to a comprehensive planning process?
2. Who else should be involved? Is the team complete?
3. How should the process fit into the department’s fiscal year?
4. How much time is the department willing to commit to strategic planning?
5. How much time is there to complete the planning process?
6. How long will the process take?
7. What information is needed to plan effectively?
8. Who is going to develop the data?
9. Who is going to analyze and interpret the data collected?

10. Are the right people assigned to the task?

According to the International Association of Fire Chief’s, “Fire chiefs, presidents, and elected officials are often so preoccupied with immediate issues that lose sight of their ultimate goals. That’s why preparation of a strategic plan is a necessity. A plan is not a recipe for sure success, but without it a fire department is much more likely to fail (IAFC, 2005, p. 8).”

Strategic planning is a critical to any organization and should provide the following:

1. Serve as a framework for decisions.
2. Provide a basis for more detailed planning.
3. Provide detailed plans that include timelines, assignments and evaluations.
4. Explain the services provided to others in order to inform, motivate and involve.
5. Assist bench marking and performance monitoring.
6. Stimulate change and become the building block for next plan within established timelines.

According to Murrey Loflin and Russell Sanders, authors of Evaluating Local Risks and Planning for the Necessary Resources chapter in Managing Fire and Rescue Services, the focus of a strategic plan is usually on the entire organization and incorporates a variety of perspectives and approaches used in the planning process. The way that a strategic plan is developed depends on the nature of the organization's leadership, culture, complexity of the organization's environment, size of the organization and the strategic planning team. Strategic planning is also different than operational planning or short-term planning which primarily focuses on annual or budgeting process, whereas strategic plans will focus on the future and direction of an organization. There is no right or wrong answer as to how long a strategic plan should be
intended for. Most fire departments design their plan between five to ten years of outlook, however this should be answered based on the needs of the community. It also requires that choices be made about an organization’s future. These choices will primarily evolve around the mission, vision, goals, services, expectations, values, strategies, and resources and how they will be acquired. In order to help determine how long a strategic plan should plan for requires some fundamental considerations that need to be first examined. The strategic planning team will need to examine how much change is currently taking place within department and locality. It will need to consider the funding source and the reliability of future funding for individual projects. The team will need to consider the likelihood and reality of what will occur in the next year, three years, five years, etc. All of these questions will assist in starting the planning process. (ICMA, 2002).

Peter Drucker explained strategic planning this way, “strategic planning isn’t simply the application of measurement techniques used in the decision-making process. Strategic planning is a process designed to encourage analytical thinking, plus a commitment of available resources to action. Strategic planning isn’t a forecasting technique, because it deals with decisions made today. Moreover, strategic planning isn’t a technique designed to eliminate risk, since it helps the leadership of the fire department manage the risks that the department must take (Wallace, 2006, p. 7).”

In summary, the literature review identifies numerous elements that should be considered in a strategic plan and also the importance on why strategic planning is necessary. It is important for fire department leaders to understand and identify these areas of importance within the planning process to ensure an effective strategic plan.
There are a variety of strategic planning models that are used in both the public and private sector, including goals-based, issues-based, organic, scenario. Various business analysis techniques can be used in strategic planning, including a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats), PEST analysis, (Political, Economic, Social, and Technological), STEER analysis, (Socio-cultural, Technological, Economic, Ecological, and Regulatory factors), and EPISTEL (Environment, Political, Information, Social, Technological, Economic and Legal). These various techniques can differ depending on the organization and mission.

According Mark Wallace, author of *Fire Department Strategic Planning*, he states that there are only two known models that are designed specifically for the use by government or other service-based organizations. He states “all other known models have been developed and designed for use by for-profit businesses and organizations (Wallace, 2006, p.51).” Due to this, most governments and fire departments have designed their strategic plan around the basis of a business model. However, having a successful and effective strategic plan for an organization is not based on a certain type of model but rather its application. Most fire departments that have conducted strategic plans have used the SWOT model with looking at the organization’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. This model has proven to be an effective template with evaluating and providing analysis on an organization’s internal and external environment. The SWOT analysis has been a proven and effective way for all members of the department to be involved in the planning process. Strategic planning members work in small groups with team leaders, who coordinate brainstorming while exchanging ideas about what the department does well and what challenges the department faces and to identify potential opportunities and threats. Evaluating the internal environment would conduct an analysis on the
Importance of Strategic Planning

Department’s strengths and weaknesses and it examines the current plans, programs, budgets, and it evaluates each division’s resources and performance. Evaluating the external environment would conduct an analysis on opportunities and threats and would review other public and private agencies (i.e. police departments, service authority, health department, disaster and emergency services, and neighboring fire departments). These outside agencies’ missions, goals, objectives, and resources should be taken into consideration (ICMA, 2002, p. 63). In addition to the SWOT analysis the external environment should also be explored by looking at the political, economic, social, and technological factors (PEST analysis). It is important for the planning team to determine how the political, economic, social, and technological issues may either affect the department severely or could provide additional opportunities. This will require the planning team to work with other experts from inside and outside the department. The PEST analysis should be conducted just as the SWOT analysis does, it should conducted from the viewpoint of the community while understanding that what is best for the community is best for the department. The International City / County Management Association (ICMA), Managing Fire and Rescue Services states the following, “like the SWOT analysis, the PEST analysis helps the department’s planners avoid planning in a vacuum. Often the success of established goals depends on political, economic, and/or social support, and a recent technological advance may prove to be the catalyst enabling a particular project or program to gain political support and/or financial resources. This analysis too serves as a reality check (ICMA, 2002, p. 64).”

Once a department conducts a SWOT and PEST analysis the focus should then be conducting a final review of the mission statement. Most fire departments will have an existing mission statement prior to conducting a strategic plan, however, throughout this analysis and evaluation, it may be apparent to change a departments’ mission statement to reflect the present
and future responsibilities. Developing the mission for the department acts as “The guiding star for the organization that describes who we are, what we do, and how we will carry out the services of the organization (Wallace, 2006, p. 51).”

After evaluating the department and defining or re-defining its mission the next major step is to define goals, objectives, and timetables. Both goals and objectives will establish the level of service to be provided in the community. The goals will act as organizational policy statements in order to state purpose or intent. In strategic business planning, goals have provided planning teams with clear direction that the department and leaders should take. According to chapter 22 of the Chief Fire Officer’s Desk Reference, these department goals can be defined by three different ways to include, autocratic, democratic, and team-based. With autocratic the department chief of chief officers would set the goals and ensure that staff follows orders. This type of goal setting has not been very effective because one person is only setting the department’s goals. With the democratic approach the manager creates a process in which all the firefighters have input on what goals to be established. This type of approach can too have some drawbacks due to some of the real issues that may not be effectively getting addressed and could allow support for some hidden agendas. The team-based approach for goal setting is the most time-consuming but tends to be the better of the three choices. This is due to the manager establishing a team that would group analyzes problem statements, create the goals and measure the progress (ICMA, 2006, p. 428).

Defining the department’s objectives is to establish specific results that will be expected within a given time. Objectives are also sometimes referred to as milestones. These objectives should be narrowly focused and should provide defined steps at accomplishing goals. Often times several objectives are required to effectively implement one goal. In addition, just as a
time frame has to be established for the planning process, goals and objectives must be assigned a specific time frame that should be both reasonable and flexible.

Throughout this section of literature review it has become evident into the model of how we must conduct our strategic plan for our department. By researching these various documents, we should embrace the SWOT and PEST analysis models into evaluating our department in order to adequately prepare a strategic plan. It is also important that we utilize a team-based approach when establishing goals for our department.

In order to examine how other fire and rescue organizations have implemented strategic plans, I researched the City of Virginia Beach Fire Department’s (VBFD) Strategic Plan and the Washington D.C. Fire and EMS Strategic Plan. In the VBFD strategic plan I learned that their plan was designed to be effective for 10 years, starting in 2006 to 2016 with providing operational and fiscal interests for the 2009 and 2010 budget years. In their plan they clearly follow a majority of the key elements that the above planning experts recommended with strategic planning. VBFD’s strategic plan is approximately 13 pages long and starts out by defining and stating its core mission, vision, and values. The plan continues with making strategic goal statements followed by operational statements. The VBFD’s strategic plan revolves around four primary elements of which are community relationships, service delivery, leadership, influence, and resources. Each item is followed by various strategic and operational goals.

In the Washington D.C. Fire and EMS (DC FEMS) Strategic Plan, it was established in 2008 by creating a team of 45 senior staff members that met over a three-day brainstorming meeting and facilitated by subject-matter experts within the fire service. In this planning process, the DC FEMS also utilizes the SWOT and PEST analysis in order to evaluate its strengths,
weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The plan also addresses its five biggest priorities, which includes, customer needs, member needs, apparatus and equipment, technology, and facilities. In addition, the plan provides emphasis around the department’s mission and values, but also addresses future assumptions. These future assumptions were designed to ensure the importance of realistic expectations. This was accomplished by dividing the team into five groups and having them make assumptions about the future of the fire department based on six categories including, internal economic factors, external economic factors, internal political factors, external political factors, technological factors, and social factors. The DC FEMS strategic plans also list strategic objectives, priorities with assigned responsibilities and future considerations.

While researching strategic planning in private business I found that ensuring business sustainability and profit margin were the only significant items that were different than strategic plans for fire departments. This was apparent early on in my research after learning that public agencies started and adopted strategic planning models based around private business. I found many strategic business plans within the private sector that utilized the same approach as fire departments had in identifying the stakeholders, defining their mission, core values and goals and by a thorough evaluation into its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, but with the goal of being the best in the market and ensuring financial profit.

In summary, after researching two nationally recognized fire departments strategic plans, it has proven that with utilizing the SWOT and PEST analysis and combining strategic goals and objectives while including operational and fiscal impact is the direction that our department should take when conducting our strategic plan. In addition, this research supports the fact that even with the most strategic planning process it could not be successful if it is not supported in
the department’s budget. It is critical that while a department is in the early stages of its planning process that it embraces the reality of the political and economical impact.

PROCEDURES

Research was conducted by utilizing a descriptive research method in order to determine how strategic planning is critical in organizations, how other fire and rescue organizations implemented strategic planning, how private businesses incorporated strategic planning, who should be involved in strategic planning, how many years a strategic plan should target for, what are the key elements of strategic planning, and what would our organization hope to gain from a strategic plan. In addition, a 5 step process was completed, in order to define what strategic planning is, how others have incorporated strategic planning, what were the key elements of a strategic plan, and how should the KGFRES incorporate strategic planning. The fifth step was surveying various members within the KGFRES to include; volunteers, county paid fire and rescue employees, supervisory company officers and chief officers.

This applied research project began with author conducting literature review and collecting data at the National Fire Academy’s Learning Resource Center (LRC), the Smoot Library in King George, Virginia and the World Wide Web. The author used books, reports, Applied Research Projects, and a survey to provide the vital information that is contained in this applied research project. The author also utilized internet search engines to locate information regarding strategic planning. The term “strategic planning” was entered into Google and Yahoo. The author also entered a variety of different phrases regarding strategic planning. Examples of these different phrases are; strategic plans, fire department strategic planning, strategy planning, and planning strategically. Researching the different phrases of strategic planning resulted in numerous information and varied from search engine.
The author conducted extensive research with literature review of the following books and reports; the International Association of Fire Chief’s (IAFC), Chief Fire Officer’s Desk Reference, the IAFC Blue and Red Ribbon Report, the International City / County Management Association (ICMA) Managing Fire Services and Managing Fire and Rescue Services, Fire Department Strategic Planning by Mark Wallace, the Virginia Department of Fire Programs – Report of Fire and Rescue Services for King George County, two Executive Fire Officer – Applied Research Projects, the National Fire Protection Association, Business Strategic Planning, the City of Virginia Beach Fire Department Strategic Plan and the Washington D.C. Fire and EMS Strategic Plan. In addition a survey was developed and was made up of questions that were discovered during the literature review. The survey was conducted with internal members of our department and included both non-supervisory and supervisory firefighters. A free online survey format was created from Survey Monkey internet surveys. This survey was completed on the internet at http://surveymonkey.com and was able to compile the information from this internet site. The survey was kept anonymous in order to encourage participants to feel open about their responses. The survey was sent via email to 20 active fire and rescue volunteers and 15 paid fire and rescue county employees. The survey was analyzed in order to gather critical information about future strategic planning, the planning process and the need for change within the King George County, Department of Fire, Rescue, and Emergency Services (KGFRES).

There are numerous limitations that were included with conducting the survey. First, the survey was not provided to the entire membership of the department. Second, the survey did not have equal representation of volunteers from different assigned stations. Third, the survey was conducted utilizing members serving in different capacities. Some of these members were junior
firefighters while other members were chief fire officers. Of the 20 volunteer members that were invited to take the survey, only 14 responded to the questions and of the 15 paid members, only 12 responded to the questions. Lastly, the survey utilized a different number of volunteer and paid fire and rescue members.

RESULTS

The results of this applied research project have been conducted from extensive literature review and survey information. The following results are provided to answer each of the seven questions:

Why is strategic planning critical in any organization? All of the literature sources agreed that strategic planning was critical in any organization regardless of public or private business sector. Much of this research for this question was conducted with the focus on fire department strategic planning. Mark Wallace stated in Fire Department Strategic Planning that “a department that isn’t moving forward is dying or, at least, in danger of dying. The members of a fire department know this instinctively. A stagnant department is typified by frustrated and nonproductive members with low morale. A fire department that knows where it is going, knows the environment in which it must operate, and has identified how to get there has the best chance of achieving its goals and desires (Wallace, 2006).”

How have other fire and rescue organizations implemented strategic planning? In order to answer this question, research was conducted by looking at two current fire department strategic plans from organizations with national recognition. The two strategic plans were from the City of Virginia Beach Fire Department (VBFD) and the Washington D.C. Fire and EMS (DC FEMS) department. After researching both strategic plans it was apparent that both departments implemented their strategic plans after utilizing a model approach. After selecting the planning
team, the approach was to address each organization’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) and to address its internal and external environment. In addition, the VBFD strategic plan emphasized their strategic goal statements with their operational statements under five separate categories. Each category was supported with a strategic statement. An example of this is under the category of influence. The strategic statement states, “VBFD must focus on continuous improvement of leadership and management practices through the clarification of positions, roles and responsibilities, performance expectations, and a dedication to maintaining an organizational culture of excellence (VBFD, 2009). In the DC FEMS strategic plan it had been developed using a very systematic approach and model. During a three-day brainstorming session outside of the city limits and the planning team included 45 members of the DC FEMS, stating that each member played an important role into identifying key elements and provided action items to ensure the department’s progress and success. The plan started with the department’s mission statement and values, and then went into further discussion about future assumptions and an overview of the SWOT analysis that was performed. Each strength, weakness, opportunity and threat was listed in the plan. The plan also included a further breakdown into the various elements of its internal and external environment. The plan addressed internal and external economic factors, internal and external political factors, technological factors, and social factors. Following the SWOT analysis the planning team was tasked with defining the department’s biggest challenges. These included apparatus and equipment, facilities, technology, members, and customers. Once the 45 member planning team concluded its meeting an Executive Committee then met in order to review the material and select key objectives that needed immediate attention and action. Concluding the DC FEMS strategic plan involved providing a further breakdown into its strategic objectives. Each strategic
objective had been provided with a prioritization an action item, assigned manager(s), and an estimated completion date.

How have private businesses incorporated strategic planning? In order to research this question I looked at two different types of private industry, which included General Electric’s (GE) strategic planning process and the University of Mary Washington College (UMW) strategic plan. In addition, research was also conducted in the book titled Strategic planning for public and non-profit organizations (2004). In GE’s strategic planning process they conducted a GE/McKinsey Matrix template utilizing a nine-cell (3 by 3) matrix used to perform business portfolio analysis as one of the steps in their strategic planning process. This GE/McKinsey Matrix business analysis was used in conjunction with performing a SWOT analysis. This analysis identified the optimum business portfolio as one that matches the company's strengths to the most attractive industry sectors or markets in order to maximize profit. The GE strategic planning matrix compared primarily two items including, industry attractiveness and business unit strength. This matrix assisted with performing its SWOT analysis. The GE strategic plan also identified its mission and values to its customers and stockholders.

The UMW strategic plan stated many of the items that were identified in the two fire department’s strategic plans. The UMW plan focused on their institutional values and mission while identifying their strategic goals and objectives for making strategic decisions, guiding their resource allocations, directing their efforts, and determining their progress over the next five to eight years. The UMW plan was developed from the imagination, creativity, knowledge, and experience of the UMW community, while being responsible to the President and Board of Visitors. The planning team consisted of their faculty, students, staff, and alumni. The planning team was called the Steering Committee and created fourteen discussion groups. Progress of the
strategic planning was advertised on a public website in order for others to stay updated. The UMW plan included an executive summary, mission statement, strategic issues, guiding values and goals. The plan was intended to provide strategic guidance from 2009 to 2014 and included a total of 26 pages. It did not appear that the Steering Committee conducted its strategic plan with utilizing a SWOT or PEST analysis.

How many years should our strategic plan target for? After researching many public and private strategic plans along with reading various opinions from various authors, I concluded that the consistency was leaning to the 5-year strategic planning. Throughout my research I found that different sources discussed strategic planning on a 3-year, 5-year, or 10 bases. Below is the following strategic planning period:

1. Virginia Beach Fire Department – 10 year.
2. Washington D.C. Fire and EMS – 1 year.
3. Iowa City Fire Department – 10 year.
5. General Electric – unknown.

Mark Wallace in *Fire Department Strategic Planning* (2006) stated that fire departments should develop planning on the following levels, short-range, medium-range, long-range and strategic plans along with providing clarification into the difference of operational planning vs. strategic planning. He states, “segregation in the type of planning is based on the need to make projections beyond a one-year period (Wallace, 2006, p.223).” A short-range plan would involve in activities that occur less than one year. A medium-range planning is designed to achieve goals within one to five years. Long-range planning would involve decisions that have a life span of more than five years. After researching various strategic plans and reports it has been determined
that the KGFRES strategic plan should be developed with the focus around a three to five year outlook and address both our strategic goals and objectives along with some operational planning.

What key elements should a strategic plan encompass? There were various authors that provided key elements regarding strategic planning. The following are several that will be valuable in developing a strategic plan for KGFRES. In the book titled, *Corporate Planning* (1980), it is identified that any strategic planning system should address four primary questions. Strategic planning must answer:

1. Where are we going?
2. How do we get there?
3. What is our blueprint for action?
4. How do we know if we are on track?

In addition, in the book *Fire Department Strategic Planning* (2006) by Mark Wallace identified ten elements in developing a strategic plan. These key elements are:

1. Understanding and applying the values of the department.
2. Identifying the department’s mandates.
3. Developing the mission of the department.
4. Understanding and defining the philosophy of operation.
5. Assessing the challenges and opportunities of the external environment.
6. Assessing the weaknesses and strengths of the internal environment.
7. Identifying the strategic issues faced by the department.
8. Creating strategic goals for the strategic issues.
9. Creating the department’s ideal future through proactive futuring.
10. Operational planning from a strategic perspective.

The International Association of Fire Chief’s (IAFC) reported in *Lighting the Path of Evolution – The Red Ribbon Report* that a “strategic plan involves a multi-step process addressing, vision, mission, objectives values, strategies, goals, and programs (IAFC, 2005, p.8).” The IAFC provided insightful information and reported that a sound strategic plan should:

1. Serve as a framework for decisions or for securing support/approval.
2. Provide a basis for more detailed planning.
3. Incorporate detailed plans that include timelines, assignments and evaluations.
4. Explain the services provided to others in order to inform, motivate and involve.
5. Assist benchmarking and performance monitoring.
6. Stimulate change and become the building block for the next plan within established timelines.

What is our organization hoping to gain with having a strategic plan? It the author’s goal that the KGFRES will develop a strategic plan with the components outlined in this applied research project in order to act as a roadmap for the department and guide and provide direction for where the department is going in the next five years. The IAFC’s *Chief Fire Officers Desk Reference* provided information on what an organization should hope to gain from strategic planning stating “a strategic plan should also be re-evaluated and kept up-to-date and should be used to evaluate the department’s performance of services, provide leadership, empower employees, and evaluate the efforts of the staff; as such it provides direction for the organization and for those employees who wish to contribute to the growth of the organization (IAFC, 2006, p. 427).” In addition, strategic planning for the department will help align the members by
making them aware of the stated mission and values of the organization and by making them aware of what is expected of them.

A department survey instrument was created in order to receive feedback from 35 department personnel in regards to strategic planning. The survey provided valuable feedback and will assist in how the KGFRES implements its strategic planning process. Of the 35 members that were invited to take the survey, 20 were active volunteers and 15 were county paid employees. 26 of the department members responded to the survey. The survey consisted of 6 questions regarding strategic planning within the KGFRES. When asked is strategic planning an important aspect in the fire service the responses were 62% strongly agreed, 34% agreed, and 4% disagreed. When asked if the KGFRES was in need of a strategic plan, the responses were 76% strongly agreed, 22% agreed, and 2% disagreed. When asked if the KGFRES should include both internal and external stakeholders on the strategic planning team the responses were 58% strongly agreed, 36% agreed, and 6% disagreed. When asked if the department strategic plan should be created as a 5-year plan the responses were 78% strongly agreed, 14% agreed, and 8% disagreed. When asked if the department’s mission and goals were clearly defined the responses were 88% strongly agreed, 10% agreed, and 2% disagreed. When asked would KGFRES benefit by having a strategic plan the responses were 82% strongly agreed, 18% agreed and 0% disagreed.

DISCUSSION

The results of this applied research project clearly show the need for the King George County, Department of Fire, Rescue, and Emergency Services (KGFRES) to develop and implement a strategic plan. The purpose for this applied research project was to determine how critical strategic planning is in organizations, to see how other fire and rescue organizations have
implemented strategic plans, to see how private businesses have incorporated strategic planning, to find out who should be involved in the planning process for our department, to see how many years should we develop the strategic plan for, to find out what the key elements are for a strategic plan, and to ultimately see what the KGFRES would possibly gain by having a strategic plan.

Before much research could begin, it was imperative to determine what exactly is a strategic plan, in order to understand its definition. Many authors discuss strategic planning and provide the elements necessary for a successful plan, but rarely will you find a true definition of strategic planning. The International City / County Management Association (ICMA) define strategic planning as the process of investigation, learning, and implementation in a collaborative environment so that the entire organization progresses and evolves (ICMA, 2002). John Bryson also defines strategic planning in his book *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations*, he states that strategic planning is “a set of concepts, procedures and tools designed to assist leaders and managers in exercising control, coping with change and developing a basis for decision making (Bryson, 2004). Having a clear definition of what strategic planning was exactly, provided insightful information to the author and will assist in the development of a strategic plan for the KGFRES.

The next item of research was to determine how critical strategic planning was to any organization. The author found through extensive research that no fire department, private business, or any other public agency stated that strategic planning was a bad idea and that it is not recommended. All the organizations that were researched showed that strategic planning was critical to their department / organization’s future. The KGFRES will need to move forward with the development and implementation of a strategic plan, as there will be more harm in doing
nothing. Mark Wallace stated that “if you don’t know where you are going, than any road will take you there (Wallace, 2006).” The author also found some distinct differences in the strategic planning processes between the City of Virginia Beach Fire Department (VBFD) and the Washington D.C. Fire Department (DC FEMS). Both departments had well structured and outlined plans, but the major differences that were noted was the amount of time the planning period was developed for. The VBFD strategic plan was intended for a 5-year period whereas the DC FEMS plan was intended for a 1-year period. I also noted that the VBFD had a combination of budgeting implications along with addressing its strategic future. The VBFD strategic plan was designed with the annual city budget fiscal year process in mind and did have both strategic planning along with operational planning. The DC FEMS strategic plan did not appear to have as much emphasis on operational planning. The DC FEMS did appear to put more emphasis on utilizing the SWOT and PEST analysis vs. the VBFD strategic planning process. The KGFRES will need to develop it strategic planning process so that it utilizes the SWOT and PEST model and that it understands the relationship between strategic goals and operational and funding resources.

After researching strategic planning in private business, it became apparent that strategic planning was practically the same in regards to development, but with one major difference. This major difference evolved around business profit. The author also learned that the strategic planning started as a business model and was incorporated later into public service strategic planning. The International Association of Fire Chief’s states in the book, Chief Fire Officer’s Desk Reference, that “strategic business planning is not a new concept; in fact, it has been an integral part of the business world since the Industrial Revolution and had helped build corporate giants such as Motorola, IBM, and General Electric (IAFC, 2006, p.426).” The KGFRES should
incorporate many of the characteristics and models that are associated with strategic business planning into its planning process.

When the author conducted research into who should be involved in the planning team for the KGFRES strategic plan, it was noted that all the research indicated a list of key internal and external stakeholders that are recommended to be included. It was also noted that no author recommended a fire department strategic planning team to be only made up of internal department firefighters. The KGFRES should incorporate internal members at all levels to include, non-supervisory firefighters, company officers, chief officers, fire chief, county administration staff, finance staff, elected official, community representative, and business / industry representative.

The author also found various answers and some mixed results regarding how long strategic plans should target for. The research did show most consistency with targeting a strategic plan for around 5 years. Mark Wallace discusses in his book *Fire Department Strategic Planning*, the differences between short-term, medium-term, long-term operational plans, and strategic plans. He states that strategic plans should not plan for more than 5 years (Wallace, 2006). The author feels that the KGFRES strategic plan should plan for 5 years, but not for any longer. The author also feels that having a plan for a 1-year period would be primarily for operational purposes and not for strategic planning.

When the author researched key elements of a strategic plan it was noted that many publishers provided what a strategic plan should address. Many authors provided what critical questions a strategic plan should address, however the only author that provided a step-by-step approach and template as to the key elements that should be involved in a strategic plan was
Mark Wallace in his book, *Fire Department Strategic Planning*. Wallace identifies ten elements in developing a strategic plan. These key elements are:

1. Understanding and applying the values of the department.
2. Identifying the department’s mandates.
3. Developing the mission of the department.
4. Understanding and defining the philosophy of operation.
5. Assessing the challenges and opportunities of the external environment.
6. Assessing the weaknesses and strengths of the internal environment.
7. Identifying the strategic issues faced by the department.
8. Creating strategic goals for the strategic issues.
9. Creating the department’s ideal future through proactive futuring.
10. Operational planning from a strategic perspective.

This information will prove to be valuable to the KGFRES strategic planning process and clearly states what key elements must be incorporated into a strategic plan in order to ensure success.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations are based upon the problem and purpose statement of this applied research project and the resulting research. As stated previously, the problem is that the King George County Department of Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services (KGFRES) has no strategic plan. This in turn has created a department that mainly addresses issues in their present state and has been based primarily on reaction. The purpose of this research was to identify the elements that would be involved in developing a strategic plan and how a strategic plan would be implemented within KGFRES.
Descriptive research was used and the literature review, results, and survey provided answers to the following questions:

1. Why is strategic planning critical in any organization?
2. How have other fire and rescue organizations implemented strategic planning?
3. How have private sector businesses incorporated strategic planning?
4. Who should be involved in strategic planning within our organization?
5. How many years should our strategic plan target for?
6. What key elements should strategic plan encompass?
7. What is our organization hoping to gain with having a strategic plan?

The result of this research identified the need for the KGFRES to develop and implement a strategic plan. The author recommends that the department leaders raise awareness into the importance of having a strategic plan. It is recommended that before a strategic planning team is established that an initial endorsement be completed with the King George County Administrator and Board of Supervisors. Research has shown that this is a critical step in the strategic planning process since most strategic plans will have some budgetary impact. It is also recommended that the County Administrator and Board of Supervisors provide feedback into the establishment of the planning team. This step will help facilitate buy-in from the key leaders that will ultimately have the final acknowledgment into the department’s strategic plan.

The author recommends that the department establish a strategic planning team that is well diversified and allows for input from both internal and external stakeholders. Below is an example of the diversification that should be incorporated into the planning team:

1. Fire Chief
2. Chief officers (i.e. Division Chief, EMS Chief, Technical Service Chief, etc.)
3. City / County administration representative
4. Elected official representative
5. Private industry representatives
6. Non-supervisory firefighter
7. Member from a neighboring fire department
8. Volunteer fire department representative
9. EMS representative

Once the strategic planning team is established it is recommended that the team understand the purpose and importance of a strategic plan. This will ensure that all team members are provided with clear direction as to the expectations of the strategic planning process. As outlined by the International Association of Fire Chief’s (IAFC) reported in *Lighting the Path of Evolution – The Red Ribbon Report*, the strategic planning team should develop a strategic plan in order to (IAFC, 2005):

1. Serve as a framework for decisions or for securing support/approval.
2. Provide a basis for more detailed planning.
3. Incorporate detailed plans that include timelines, assignments and evaluations.
4. Explain the services provided to others in order to inform, motivate and involve.
5. Assist benchmarking and performance monitoring.
6. Stimulate change and become the building block for the next plan within established timelines.
In addition, the author recommends that the strategic planning team adopt key elements in the 10-step model as outlined by Mark Wallace in his book, *Fire Department Strategic Planning* (Wallace, 2006). These key elements are:

1. Understanding and applying the values of the department.
2. Identifying the department’s mandates.
3. Developing the mission of the department.
4. Understanding and defining the philosophy of operation.
5. Assessing the challenges and opportunities of the external environment.
6. Assessing the weaknesses and strengths of the internal environment.
7. Identifying the strategic issues faced by the department.
8. Creating strategic goals for the strategic issues.
9. Creating the department’s ideal future through proactive futuring.
10. Operational planning from a strategic perspective.

It is also recommended that the strategic planning team develop a plan based on a five year future. Once approved, the strategic plan should be reviewed prior to each budget year to ensure that any fiscal impact is planned for. The final strategic plan should then serve as a road map for KGFRES and should be the bases of all future strategic decisions for the department.

It is recommended that future readers of this applied research project use this research as a tool, but to evaluate the need of strategic planning in one’s own organization. The author also recommends to future readers that additional research be conducted into determining the culture of one’s organization. The department should be evaluated for, acceptance to incorporate change, new ideas, traditional values, clearly defined mission and goals. Evaluating these components is necessary as the level of strategic planning will vary with different departments.
In addition, it is recommended that further research be conducted in comparing fire departments that incorporate strategic planning and those that do not.
References


Virginia Department of Fire Programs. (2001). *A Study of the Fire and Rescue Services of King George County, Virginia*.


Appendix A

King George County, Fire, Rescue, and Emergency Services

Survey Instrument

Questions:

1. Do you feel that strategic planning is an important aspect in the fire service?
   Strongly agree   agree   disagree   strongly disagree

2. Do you feel that our department is in need of a strategic plan?
   Strongly agree   agree   disagree   strongly disagree

3. Do you feel that a strategic planning team should consist of internal and external stakeholders?
   Strongly agree   agree   disagree   strongly disagree

4. Do you feel that the department should create a strategic plan for to include a 5 year period?
   Strongly agree   agree   disagree   strongly disagree

5. Is the department mission and goals well defined?
   Strongly agree   agree   disagree   strongly disagree

6. Do you feel that the department would benefit from having a strategic plan?
   Strongly agree   agree   disagree   strongly disagree