

# The consolations of consolidation

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Regardless of where you serve in the American fire service, regionalization or consolidation has probably been discussed at some time. Whether consolidation is carried out for reasons of economy, efficiency or both, you're certain to experience a period of organizational uncertainty following such a transition.

The consolidation of fire services in Cherry Hill, N.J., which took place six years ago, created such a time of uncertainty. Our current vantage point, however, lets us look back and examine clearly and accurately the battles and ultimate benefits of consolidation.

A consolidation case study A suburb of Philadelphia, Cherry Hill is about 25 square miles with a population estimated by the 1990 census at 69,000. Until 1993, fire protection had been handled by six independent fire districts, each led by its own board of fire commissioners, and each with its own fire chief, fire marshal, training officer, members and support staff.

Consolidation efforts had been discussed on numerous occasions starting back in the 1970s and even went as far as to have a study done in 1979. In 1993 the consolidation effort heated up again, when a petition was circulated throughout the town requesting the merger of the six independent districts into one department.

A grass-roots effort was established by concerned citizens and representatives from both the one all-volunteer and five combination fire districts. Questions about fiscal accountability, disproportionate tax rates and the inefficiency of six autonomous entities were the driving forces behind this movement. Although consolidation had been discussed in the past, it had never achieved the momentum to require action on behalf of the municipal government.

On June 22, 1993, however, the Cherry Hill Township Council passed an ordinance dissolving the six districts and creating a new fire district for the township. A special election in September 1993 named the five new commissioners of the consolidated Cherry Hill Fire Department. After selecting the new fire chief, Roger M. Ulshafer, a retired commissioner of the Philadelphia Fire Department, the board set about to accomplish the many tasks needed to organize this new department.

The new fire district's budget had to be prepared within 120 days so it could be adopted at the annual budget election in February. Little financial information existed from the previous districts, which made it difficult to forecast or plan. Although each district had had an annual audit, they maintained their budget information in different formats. While

some districts cooperated with the new board, others refused to turn over existing documents, and those records that were obtained provided little information.

Multiple organized labor contracts had to be renegotiated before the end of the year so that a uniform contract would be in place for the new fire department. The newly appointed command staff had only 120 days to design the deployment plan for both apparatus and staffing that would take place on Jan. 1, 1994. With the elimination of the previous district boundaries, planning began for the efficient distribution of both apparatus and staffing that would take the entire town into consideration for the first time in the history of fire protection for Cherry Hill.

The grand opening On Jan. 1, 1994, the Cherry Hill Fire Department officially opened for business with 48 career firefighters and four civilian employees. Though nothing magical occurred when the clock struck midnight, the new board of fire commissioners, along with Chief Ulshafer and the various department heads, were about to begin the journey most consolidated organizations have to take.

Members of the organization who'd been against consolidation presented every roadblock imaginable to derail the new department. For example, after years of neglect, they now questioned why the roof was leaking and when the old protective equipment would be replaced.

Fortunately, there was also a host of dedicated members who remained cooperative and patient and made themselves available to the newly formed department. Organizational priorities were developed and division goals established. In all honesty, there were times when those goals changed weekly and even daily because of the impact of managing so much change at once.

In February 1994, we presented a budget to the public that was less than the previous multiple fire district budgets combined. The individuals who weren't happy with the consolidation focused on defeating the budget and were successful in their efforts. After accepting a \$100,000 cut in the spending plan for fiscal 1994, the fire board and Chief Ulshafer modified the operating budget and moved forward with managing this newly formed department. This would prove to be a recurring theme, in that each time the new department was set back, we moved forward again.

A broad range of benefits After six years, the consolidated department has many improvements to report. Standard operating guidelines provide for the uniform operations of our forces. The department's Training and Safety Division implemented certification-based training that has led to national certification of our personnel under Firefighter, Fire Officer I, Fire Officer II and Fire Service Instructor.

The department's fleet of apparatus has improved substantially since we consolidated. The sale of surplus vehicles, reduction in the overall age of the fleet and the replacement of most of the light-duty fleet are examples of this success. A new maintenance facility

will be used by the department's mechanics to maintain the motorized fleet and all small equipment.

Our Logistics Division, which oversees maintenance and operation of the department's facilities and handles the purchase of supplies and equipment, has streamlined purchasing procedures and saved the department thousands of dollars through joint purchasing.

The Fire Prevention Bureau brought together six independent enforcing agencies that now operate under a unified command. With the support of the companies assigned to the Operations Division, the Fire Prevention Bureau has been extremely active in improving the level of public education, awareness and interaction.

Here's a division-by-division look at how the consolidation has changed fire protection in Cherry Hill.

**Operations Division** The Operation Division reports to the assistant fire chief. There are three platoons, each of which is commanded by a battalion chief. The on-duty battalion chief is responsible for fireground command, staffing and overall supervision. There are five companies on duty totaling 20 firefighters and five officers. This arrangement is supported by our active volunteer fire company, which can supply an additional two engines and one utility/cascade. Through this configuration, we can now provide consistent response to 911 calls for service.

**Stronger incident command:** Before consolidation, company officers at times had to operate as incident commanders, which reduced the number of people available to fight the fire. The on-duty bc now responds and commands all significant incidents.

In addition, once an all-hands signal is transmitted, two additional chief officers respond, one to restore the on-duty battalion chief and the second to the fire scene to support incident command. The department's safety officer responds to the all-hands, as do the on-duty fire marshal and command fire marshal. This arrangement lets us summon additional resources when most needed.

**Higher staffing levels:** Prior to consolidation, there were times when only a duty officer in a light-duty vehicle was available to respond to a 911 call. After consolidation, this was immediately remedied by dispatching a staffed company on all responses to ensure that no 911 calls go unanswered.

Before consolidation, staffing levels varied between one and four members per company by time of day. The new department established a minimum of three firefighters and one officer for each company, to improve personnel safety and allow us to work toward meeting the minimum levels for interior firefighting. This action ensured that we would arrive with a minimum of 13 members at any structural fire.

In July 1998, we opened our fifth 24-hour fire station, which afforded us the ability to re-align our response boundaries townshipwide. Collectively, these upgrades have allowed us to improve response time by 15%.

First responder ems: Before the consolidation, many sections of the town went without the benefit of a first responder program. Immediately after consolidation, all sections of the town received immediate response to all life-threatening emergencies. All members are trained to provide first responder services, and we've just implemented the use of six aeds throughout the department.

An expanded role for volunteers: Cherry Hill Fire Company #1 has expanded its operational role within the department. Previously relegated to their response locale, the company's 23 members now respond townshipwide to all major incidents and provide a number of specialized services, including a marine unit, power wagon (brush unit), cascade and emergency command post.

Other improvements: A complete revision of the response grid system updated information that was more than 18 years old.

- \* All members complete a minimum of two drills a month, one delivered by the training division and the other by the company officer.

- \* Pre-fire plans are completed each month by company personnel, sketched using a cad program and then installed in a directory in the battalion chief's command vehicle.

- \* The line companies also participate in numerous public education programs, ranging from using our fire safety trailer at elementary schools to attending community block parties and hosting tours at their stations.

Training and Safety Division The Training and Safety Division is a key element in any effective fire agency, and for any newly consolidated department, it can make the difference between success and failure. A full-time battalion chief and lieutenant who also serve in the capacities of the department safety officer and incident safety officers staff the division.

Certification-based training: To transition the newly consolidated department to a uniform training program, we conducted over 18 presentations to introduce the pending changes to the career and volunteer members. The department established minimum requirements for each firefighter that would be applied equally to both career and volunteer personnel. Although this required additional training for some, it provided for a minimum foundation of both fire and first responder training.

With the addition of the certification-based training program, the department decided to continue the practice of requiring only one drill per month for our members. To achieve certification, interested members would have to complete written and practical exams. We believed that during this period of great change, it would be better to allow personal

development to be the motivator, as opposed to another requirement set by the new department.

All of the promoted fire officers within the department have achieved Level III Instructor certification as established by nfpa 1041. The department maintains a relationship with the University of Maryland Fire & Rescue Institute, which gives us the ability to provide certification-based training to our members. The Training Division has issued over 132 certifications to our members since starting this program.

Improved training facilities: The training academy had been built over a period of time prior to the consolidation. Within the facility, we use a 40-seat classroom along with office space for the assigned staff and a resource room containing over 350 video lessons, 1,000 books and extensive support materials. The training grounds consist of a six-story tower, a two-story state-certified burn building and an scba maze.

Shortly after consolidation, the training staff conducted an assessment of the existing facilities and their condition. A report was forwarded to the fire chief and commissioners outlining an improvement plan for this facility. With their support and the talent of a number of department members, we were able to add many enhancements to this site.

Both flat- and peaked-roof simulators were built on the training grounds to give our personnel practice in ventilation. A confined-space simulator and high-angle training tower were recently completed with donations from the local phone company and highway department.

The training staff also acquired a complete sprinkler system from a building that was scheduled for demolition and outfitted a section of the burn building with it. In addition, a standpipe was installed to give personnel practical experience with connecting to and deploying from these systems during live fire training.

A number of maintenance items had been addressed in the original report to the chief, including the installation of adequate lighting to support night training and safety railings on both the six-story tower and the burn building. To date we've committed over \$89,000 to maintenance and improvements at the training site.

Fire Prevention Bureau Prior to the consolidation, six independent enforcing agencies operated fire prevention bureaus in Cherry Hill. Although the personnel assigned to these bureaus met regularly to discuss common issues, they operated under the control of independent boards of commissioners.

A streamlined organization: Shortly after consolidation, the new board of commissioners moved the Fire Prevention Bureau into their own facility. An organizational structure was established that provided a uniform chain of command and clearly identified job descriptions for each role within the new bureau. The division quickly set out to establish a single database to enter all the information that had previously been maintained in separate formats.

More public education: The board of commissioners recognized the importance of enhancing the role that our department played in educating the public. A full-time education officer was appointed to coordinate this task. With more than 50 educational facilities within Cherry Hill, there are plenty of opportunities to reach school-age children. We've enhanced this interaction by recently purchasing a fire safety trailer through both public and private donations.

In addition, we attend numerous community and civic events that afford us the opportunity to interact with the public and provide safety information. We've also set up enhanced public education initiatives, such as high-rise, elderly care and baby-sitter programs.

Since 1997, we've sponsored an annual civilian fire academy that educates the public in the department's role in the community. Attendees receive cpr certification and extinguisher training and participate in a live fire evolution.

Finally, we began our New Resident Program this year, distributing a collection of documents that identify our organization and provide fire safety messages to each new resident who moves into the township. The bureau manages this program in coordination with the line companies and also prepares an informational flyer each time we have a serious residential fire.

Other improvements: Only one of the six original fire districts had a Knox Box program. The new department has expanded this townshipwide, totalling more than 75 locations.

\* We've also created a quarterly department newsletter that's sent to every household and business in Cherry Hill, over 30,000 locations in all.

Motor Maintenance Division Before the consolidation, each independent district maintained its own fire apparatus. This practice ranged from a full-time mechanic in some districts to farming out all of the apparatus maintenance and repair. The new department responded to the enormous task before them by immediately assigning two full-time mechanics along with a full-time motor maintenance officer to oversee the fleet of vehicles.

Initially, the Motor Maintenance Division operated out of an existing firehouse. A cramped fit at best, this facility didn't provide suitable conditions for apparatus repair.

A new maintenance facility: Fortunately, on Dec. 9, 1995, the voters approved a bond initiative that included \$600,000 to build a new state-of-the-art maintenance garage. The Motor Maintenance Division relocated last October into a brand-new 5,000-square-foot facility. To make this as cost-effective as possible, we attached the maintenance facility to an existing fire station, which we estimate saved about \$900,000 in land costs and building systems.

With the completion of the new maintenance facility, the Cherry Hill Fire Department has entered a new era in fleet management. We're instituting a computer-based apparatus maintenance and repair system that will track and schedule these vehicles throughout their service lives. The system is also useful in tracking parts inventory and will allow us to price out specific functions within the division. At a future date, to further reduce our expenses in this division, we intend to open our doors to provide vehicle maintenance to the surrounding area.

**A newer apparatus fleet:** After conducting a complete evaluation of the present fleet, the department was able to redistribute apparatus based on both the department's needs and the condition of the apparatus. A plan was developed to sell those vehicles that weren't being used as well as, over a longer term, to replace a number of front-line vehicles during the succeeding years.

The 1995 bond issue provided over \$1.5 million for the replacement of fire apparatus and light-duty vehicles. An apparatus committee made up of members from throughout the department prepared specifications for three new pumpers and a heavy rescue that were the first new vehicles purchased by the consolidated department. Three 1997 Seagrave 1,500gpm pumpers and one 1998 Seagrave heavy rescue were delivered and placed into service during the past two years. In addition to modernizing our fleet, they've allowed us to standardized our training and afford the firefighters increased flexibility in their operation.

Our new organization also lets us tackle projects that might have been impossible before. A \$4,800 grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation funded a hazmat drill, which showed us that we didn't have the equipment to mitigate a gasoline tanker spill, so we bought a stainless-steel tank and converted it into a 400-gallon foam tender.

**Logistics Division** The Logistics Division provides all the material needed to support fire and rescue services for the residents of Cherry Hill. The head of this division also coordinates all facility maintenance, renovations and construction projects.

**Station renovations:** The department currently provides services from seven properties, some of which date back to the 1950s. As the concept of duty crews and 24-hour staffing evolved, these buildings were renovated to meet the needs of the community.

Through a cooperative effort with the full-time staff, we've been able to use a mix of professional services and our own labor to meet this goal. This partnership gives us the ability to accomplish much more with the same public dollars.

Long-range planning has afforded us the opportunity to evaluate these locations and to maximize their use for our personnel. Recently we also completed a number of capital improvements, including roof replacements, gas heat conversions and diesel tank removals with approximately \$300,000 from the 1995 bond initiative.

Savings on day-to-day supplies: The Logistics Division is also responsible for all of the office supplies, uniforms and custodial items used throughout the department. The true benefit of consolidating services is easily recognized within this division. Over the course of the last six years, we've identified sound budget data that documents savings. By implementing both supply procedures and purchasing controls, we've streamlined expenditures to an extent that wouldn't have been possible in the previous multiple-district arrangement.

With all purchasing conducted through the Logistics Division, we've evidenced savings of up to 36% for the same items that had previously been purchased through a limited number of vendors. In one case, we compared 17 similar purchases of items that were bought before and after consolidation. The pre-consolidation price of \$6,629 was \$2,381 more than what we currently pay for the same items.

A new joint purchasing agreement with the township and other municipal agencies, including the board of education and the library, has saved us additional money. We compared 32 identical office supply purchases that were made prior to consolidation. These items cost the prior districts \$5,122, but now are obtained through our joint purchasing agreement for \$4,274, a 16% savings. In addition, the joint purchasing initiative lets us buy natural gas in bulk, at a substantial savings over previous methods.

One final example: A portable radio battery evaluation program has saved over \$1,500 and provides a means to analyze and recondition the batteries we currently use in the field.

Other improvements: A reduction in the amount of stock maintained by the Logistics Division has freed up the department's cash; and new arrangements through our vendors allow for improved turnaround when items are ordered.

All the functions within the Logistics Division are now supported by a single warehouse person who provides delivery and pickup, shipping, and inventory functions. Both this individual and the division head are civilians who brought a great deal of experience from their previous employment.

Fire Administration Because of the newly consolidated department's size and the immediate need to provide internal services to the members, this division was saddled with an enormous task.

New admin building: Initially, they worked from available office space within one of the existing stations. With the passage of the 1995 bond initiative, however, the department was able to renovate a closed fire station into a 5,700-square-foot administration building. This allowed all of the administrative functions and resources to be housed under one roof.

Centralized purchasing: Immediately after consolidating, the department formalized a purchasing policy that channeled all expenditures through the finance officer, which



ensured that the appropriate accounting principles were followed and that each of the divisions would stay within budget. The department's vendors were advised of the new procedure and how to process their invoices for payment. The Finance Department selected accounting software to provide audit reports and budget updates during the calendar year.

Centralized record-keeping: All personnel and medical records were combined into a single file under lock and key in the Board of Fire Commissioners' office.

More recently, the department instituted a computer-based program that manages the personnel information, such as annual leave and personnel evaluations.

Other improvements: The Board of Fire Commissioners negotiates all professional services including auditing, legal, benefits and insurance. Significant savings were achieved by requesting proposals for services such as insurance coverage. In one year, we obtained a reduction in premium of over \$80,000.

\* The department established a local area network to streamline computer operations, especially for the Fire Prevention Bureau, Logistics Division and Fire Administration. All fire stations can dial in to the lan to access both the nfirs reporting and pre-fire planning programs, and all line and administrative officers have access to the e-mail system from any department facility.

The Cherry Hill Fire Department continues to search for ways to improve its services. After Chief Ulshafer's retirement in 1996, the board conducted a national search and selected Gerald F. Grover as the new fire chief. With previous service in Bridgeport, Conn., and Philadelphia, Chief Grover has brought a great deal of experience to this organization.

In the meantime, the department has grown to 92 career firefighters and nine civilian employees. The Board of Fire Commissioners has provided the oversight to improve fire protection and enhance accountability to the public they serve. The true measure of our success is the performance and commitment of our department's members.

\* Many consolidation efforts boast about cost savings, but then submit equal or higher budgets to provide the required level of service. It's important for fire service leaders to circulate the most accurate financial picture possible. Although the initial expense can result in an increase in the revenue needed, it's the overall savings in both tax dollars and efficiency over the long term that's the true benefit achieved for the tax-paying public.

\* Ownership issues will arise during any consolidation. To help in your planning, have a clear understanding of the ownership of all facilities and equipment. For example, stations and apparatus belonging to volunteer fire departments are often erroneously perceived to be publicly owned. Ownership issues like these shouldn't be used as reasons not to consolidate.

- \* Clearly evaluate the public's expectations of their fire and rescue services, so the new department can include these in its long-term planning. Sometimes you'll find that the public expects more than what's currently being provided.
- \* Make immediate changes that will enhance the level of service you can provide to the public with your current resources. On the other hand, hold those changes that affect appearance only.
- \* Firefighter safety is a paramount concern that should always be considered in every decision.
- \* The organization's members will undoubtedly be affected by the ongoing changes. Continuous dialogue will go a long way toward diminishing rumors and maintaining the right focus.
- \* Select the right person for the right job. Continue to analyze all the functions within the organization and be prepared to modify job descriptions or reorganize if necessary.
- \* Identify transitional goals that are realistic, evaluate productivity and measure achievements.
- \* Continually evaluate and consult with other organizations. The best approach to understanding your role is to view how others do it.
- \* Be up front and honest with your people. No one is ever sure exactly what might occur during consolidation. Run from the person who promises you everything, and embrace the individual who says, "Let's do our best and see what happens."
- \* Leaders must be willing to make critical decisions when they arise. At times those decisions won't be the most popular ones, but neither will you be if the department is a failure in the community.
- \* Regardless of how embattled things become, the personnel who exhibit professionalism, maintain a positive outlook and keep the public in mind usually come out in front.
- \* Ensure that the rules are applied equally, and that your actions are stable enough to withstand the most in-depth scrutiny.