



City of Ketchum

February 21, 2023

Mayor Bradshaw and City Councilors
City of Ketchum
Ketchum, Idaho

Mayor Bradshaw and City Councilors:

Recommendation to Enter Into Preliminary Fire Consolidation Discussions

Recommendation and Summary

Staff is recommending the Council make the following motion:

"I move to endorse City of Ketchum staff participation in discussions on possible cooperative efforts between the county fire and EMS agencies including discussions on possible functional and operational consolidation or mergers."

The reasons for the recommendation are as follows:

- Past studies indicated the probability of improved services through consolidation of Ketchum and Sun Valley Fire and through the consolidation of Hailey and Wood River Fire.
- Blaine County Ambulance Board has expressed doubts on their ability to fund increased costs of EMS, while EMS calls in the county are increasing at double digit rates, leading to a need for more cost-effective solutions.
- Members of the public have expressed sentiments encouraging less competition between the agencies and more cooperation, specifically mentioning a preference to see consolidation of fire and EMS.
- The staff (including volunteers) of Ketchum Fire Department, Sun Valley Fire Department and Wood River Fire Department have indicated strong support for consolidation discussions.
- Consolidation discussions are by no means a commitment to consolidate, but are an opportunity to see if any proposals will fit for each jurisdiction.

Introduction and History

Consolidation efforts between the fire agencies in Blaine County have been taking place on and off for over twenty years. Several studies have been commissioned including a recommendation in 2007 to fully consolidate Sun Valley and Ketchum Fire Departments, and an update in 2013 supporting that concept. A 2011 study by ESCI provided several options for consolidation between Wood River Fire District, Hailey Fire Department and Bellevue Fire Department. Consolidation did not occur; however, several recent events have revived the discussion.

Wood River Fire District ran an unsuccessful bond effort in 2021. Wood River Fire Chief Bateman analyzed pages of comments made about the effort. The single most prevalent sentiment was “consolidate with Hailey, then we may consider funding the proposal.” Anecdotally, the Ketchum Fire Department hears the same sentiment frequently from the public.

Over the past few years, the Blaine County Ambulance District has been faced with requested for increased funding from the ambulance providers and from other fire agencies wishing to become providers. For 2022, this led to a budget that is estimated to be \$400,000 or more in the red. The Ambulance District began discussing options for reducing costs.

Ketchum’s analysis of the options included:

1. Reduce funding to the ambulance providers and accept a reduced level of service.
2. Contract with a single agency at a reduced cost.
3. Seek approval for a mill levy from the voters.
4. Explore consolidation to determine if efficiencies can be gained to offset funding challenges.

Chief Bateman and Ketchum Fire Chief Bill McLaughlin met and began discussing these options. The first two may lead to increasing discord between jurisdictions, and potential layoffs. The third seems unlikely to pass in the climate expressed by the Wood River residents, leaving the last as an attractive option.

Discussions grew to include the Ambulance District. The remaining jurisdictions were then invited to consider coming to the table. The question of whether to begin exploring options is now going to most of the jurisdictions in the county.

Analysis

Both Chief Bateman and Chief McLaughlin have successfully led fire department consolidation efforts. These efforts resulted in organizations which provided a higher level of service following consolidation. It is possible that discussions here could lead to similar outcomes.

At this point, no jurisdiction is being asked to commit to any form of consolidation; merely to commit to engaging in discussions to examine options.

The firefighters of all of the departments have been surveyed to determine their willingness to move forward on these discussions. Ketchum firefighters expressed 95% in moving forward. In addition, they expressed 86% optimism that this effort could lead to improved cooperation. Wood River and Sun Valley firefighters also expressed over 90% interest in seeing this project move forward.

Consolidations rarely result in lower costs, but routinely deliver improved services. Stations can be located for better coverage of multiple jurisdictions. Apparatus costs can be reduced through strategic location and through shared reserve apparatus. Training and recruitment almost always improve. The cost of providing 8 paid chief officers in the valley can instead provide 4 chiefs, an EMS training captain, and a fire training captain. Filling a shift for a sick employee can be achieved by moving staffing between stations rather than calling someone in on overtime.

Consolidation can mean anything from a decision to share a fire marshal between two jurisdictions on up to a full legal merger. Chief McLaughlin suggests this topic be approached as an opportunity to put all the options on the table.

The consolidation of Whatcom Fire District 4 into North Whatcom Fire and Rescue took 2 years of planning and another year as a partial consolidation. This was followed by several more years under contract until the merger was put to a public vote to make it permanent. Timelines for any efforts here could vary from consolidating some services very soon, to full consolidation 5 or 6 years out.

Gradual consolidations also allow the opportunity to make sure the new organization can deliver what is promised. Jurisdictions would have the ability to opt out if the organization can't meet expectations.

In 2019, there were simultaneous openings for fire chiefs at Hailey, Wood River and Ketchum. Those are often ideal times to consolidate under a single fire chief – but the jurisdictions need to be ready to take those opportunities. The recommendation is to commit to discussions now, so Ketchum is ready when the time occurs.