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COUNCILMEMBER
Carol Frazey

MEMORANDUM

TO: WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
FROM: COUNCILMEMBER CAROL FRAZEY
RE: **INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF FIRE AND EMS STRUCTURES IN WHATCOM COUNTY**
DATE: NOVEMBER 28, 2023

In Whatcom County, there are 13 fire districts and 2 municipal fire departments (Bellingham and Lynden) serving county residents and businesses (see **Exhibit B: Fire District Map**, **Exhibit C: Fire District Information Chart**). In 2022, What-Comm dispatch received over 42,000 calls of which 79% were for EMS, 17% for fire, and 4% for community paramedic (see [EMS Data](#)). The structures of our county's fire districts have changed over time as communities have grown. For example, the North Whatcom Fire District was formed through a functional consolidation of fire districts 4 and 21, each which continues to maintain separate commissions and chiefs. Fire District 8 completed an administrative consolidation in 2019 with Bellingham Fire. The chief and staff of the Bellingham Fire serves as chief and staff of Fire District 8, which retains its own 5-member commission. Other fire districts get assistance with specific elements of operations through the use of interlocal agreements. Each of the fire districts have their own systems set up to meet the needs of recruitings, hiring, training, fleet maintenance, and other needs in addition to emergency response staff, stations, and vehicles. Partnerships can create efficiencies in costs and service delivery, and the collaboration that is already happening between fire districts acknowledges those benefits. Fire districts are already taking steps to consolidate elements of their work, and further consolidation opportunities could have many benefits for Whatcom County citizens. The time is right to hire an independent consultant to evaluate the structure of our county's fire and EMS service providers.

Types of Consolidation

[Title 52 RCW](#) authorizes the creation of fire protection districts as well as sets parameters for annexations, mergers, withdrawals, and dissolution. State codes identify several ways that fire districts can work together, from the use of interlocal agreements (RCW [39.34](#)) to full mergers. **Administrative consolidation** is when administrative/staff functions are combined, such as with Fire District 8 sharing a Fire Chief position with the Bellingham Fire Department. **Functional/Operational consolidation** happens when each district remains separate but performs special functions as if they were one district. Interlocal agreements can offer partnerships for training activities, fleet maintenance, or other elements. A **merge consolidation** is when one district absorbs the other. In 2006, [North Whatcom Fire and Rescue](#) was formed when Fire Districts 3 and 13 merged. In 2011, North Whatcom Fire and Rescue completed a functional consolidation with Whatcom County Fire District #4. **Full consolidation** is when two or more districts completely merge into a single legal entity. In 2009, Whatcom Fire Districts 2, 6, 9, and 10 joined to [form the South Whatcom Fire Authority](#), which established a new authority with its own commission and dissolved the fire district entities that formed it. A majority vote of the electorate is required prior to district boards adopting resolutions declaring districts merged or consolidated.

Benefits to Fire District Consolidation

The following is a list of potential benefits to fire district consolidation along with examples:

1. **Cost Savings** to property owners, resource efficiency/elimination of redundancy
Example: Cost savings could be achieved by a reduction in administrative staff as well as consolidation of responsibilities, for example, fleet maintenance services provided through one centralized maintenance building rather than each district providing or contracting out the service. Smaller communities, such as rural areas, may pay more in a consolidation scenario with or without improved services.
2. **Improved response times** and customer service
Example: Response times may be improved with a consolidated district that responds from the closest station, rather than from the district with jurisdictional territory.
3. **Staff expertise**
Example: Centralized training personnel could provide standardized and specialized trainings to emergency personnel across the county, rather than differing training approaches at each district.
4. **Standardization** of internal systems and services
Example: Emergency personnel would benefit from a standardized approach to recruitment, hiring, and training. Members of the public may receive more consistent service in a consolidated system rather than potentially different services from smaller fire districts unable to fund costly equipment purchases to the degree larger districts can.
5. **Less competition for funding**
Example: Fire administrations would be better positioned to seek out and receive funding, with fewer competitors for funding opportunities. Some communities like North Whatcom Fire and Rescue (NWFR) and Fire District #4 continue to vote down levy increases, and a consolidation may reduce inequities between districts.
6. **Reduced administrative costs**
Example: A consolidated administration would reduce staff time and costs, as well as potentially streamline upper level leadership positions.
7. **Consistent costs for property owners**
Example: Fire service costs vary on a cost per household for each district. Administrative costs for smaller fire districts can be a larger percentage of the district's budget. Consolidation could bring down administrative costs for smaller districts and create a more consistent per household cost across the county.
8. **Streamlined annexation** procedures
Example: As cities initiate discussions about annexing urban growth areas, interlocal agreements with fire districts are required to identify changes to service areas and revenues if for example an area will be served by a municipal fire department once annexed. Smaller districts may lose a large portion of their service area (and revenues) through annexation. Negotiations with a centralized system may be simpler.

Potential concerns

Potential concerns with consolidation may include:

1. Loss of local control, autonomy
2. Reduction in promotion opportunities as a result of fewer administrator positions
3. Potentially slower decision-making in a larger organization
4. Concerns with losing institutional knowledge, unique to each community
5. Ten or more fire chief positions could be eliminated and approximately 45-50 commissioner positions would need to agree to change the structure of their district. Implementing a new structure for fire and EMS services in Whatcom County may be a long and arduous process.

Next Steps: Independent Review

Our community can consider more fully the benefits and opportunities for consolidation through an independent review of roles, responsibilities, revenues and costs of fire districts, fire departments, and the Whatcom County EMS administration. A thorough review would include voices of all stakeholders including fire district administrations and staff, unions, commissioners, EMS Oversight Board and Technical Advisory Board members, community members, and community leaders, as well as service providers working in our county. A professional independent review can kick start a community conversation about potential benefits or drawbacks, options for transitions, and how emergency services can best serve Whatcom County citizens and businesses. **Exhibit A: Draft Scope of Work** provides an outline of tasks for an independent review.

For your reference, 2023 annual budgets for fire districts are provided in **Exhibit D: FIRE DISTRICT BUDGETS**.

EXHIBIT A: DRAFT SCOPE OF WORK

Background

Whatcom County area residents and businesses are served by 13 fire districts and 2 municipal fire departments, as well as the County EMS administration. Over time as communities have grown, these agencies have collaborated on varying elements of services. This study will review the structures, budgets, and service delivery of the current systems and identify recommendations for further collaboration and or consolidation. Additionally, the study will identify potential benefits and drawbacks of enhanced partnerships and/or consolidations.

Tasks

1. Discovery
Review and compile complete profiles on fire districts, fire departments, and County EMS administration including budgeting, staffing, interlocal agreements, administration, roles and responsibilities and other critical elements of the fire service structure in the county.
2. Outreach & Engagement
Provide opportunities for feedback and discussion about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to the current systems and structures. Identify the benefits and barriers to consolidation
3. Draft Recommendations
Provide recommendations and options for how our community could move forward to re-envision fire and EMS structures. Include potential cost savings and other benefits projected for each option. Include specific information on potential staffing changes and jobs retention.
4. Final Report
Summarize all tasks in a final report.

Stakeholders

- Fire District Administration, staff, and first responders
- Bellingham and Lynden fire departments
- Whatcom County EMS Administration
- EMS Oversight Board, Technical Advisory Board
- Whatcom County EMS & Trauma Care Council
- Private emergency service providers
- What-Comm Dispatch
- Elected officials
- Unions and Guilds
- Community leaders

Deliverables

A final report document (PDF) summarizing findings and recommendations, including all tasks described above.

Timeline

Approximately 12 – 18 months.

Cost

Estimated \$275,000.