Fire services in the Missoula Valley: a bioregional approach

Bill Silverman

The University of Montana

1994

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FIRE SERVICES IN THE MISSOULA VALLEY:

A BIOREGIONAL APPROACH

By

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B. A., University of Montana, 1980

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Public Administration

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CHAPTER 1
FIRE SERVICES IN THE MISSOULA VALLEY: AN INTRODUCTION

Missoula, Montana, located in the northern Rocky Mountains, has experienced substantial growth during the past twenty years. The City of Missoula has grown from 29,497 people in 1970 to 42,918 people in 1992, while Missoula County has grown from 58,268 people to 78,687 during the same period of time. With this increase in population has come an increase in the number of households which need fire protection services. Despite substantial growth, the valley continues to be served primarily by two fire services, the Missoula City Fire Department and the Missoula Rural Fire District. Both fire services exist in the confines of a valley constituting only 100 square miles.

Missoula is growing during a period in which local governments are facing increased fiscal stress. In pursuit of ways to deliver government services more cost effectively, many cities surrounded by rural areas are consolidating their fire services with services lying outside of city boundaries. In addition to achieving economies of scale, consolidated delivery systems may also reduce jurisdictional disputes regarding which fire-fighting units are responsible for covering which areas. An issue currently under consideration is whether to consolidate the Missoula City Fire Department and the Missoula Rural Fire District. Any future consolidation of fire services will require an agreement between city and county governments. The agreement might be any one of four commonly used types: a functional consolidation, a partial consolidation, an operational consolidation, or a merger.
Each consolidation type is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

The city of Missoula covers a land area of 16.7 square miles and uses a strong mayor/city council form of government. The current mayor, Dan Kemmis, was elected in 1990 to a four year term and is a full-time city employee. He works in conjunction with a twelve person city council and has the ability to veto decisions made by the council. The city council is responsible for determining laws and regulations which concern the city of Missoula.

Missoula County covers an area of 2,582 square miles which includes the city of Missoula. The county uses a three-person county commissioner form of government which is responsible for determining laws and regulations affecting Missoula County. The current commissioners are Ann Mary Dussault, Barbara Evans, and Fern Hart. Included in Missoula County are several small towns with their own volunteer fire departments. Clinton, Florence, Potomac, Frenchtown, Arlee, Seeley Lake, and East Missoula all have small fire departments totally run by volunteers. The Missoula valley is primarily serviced, however, by the Missoula Rural Fire District and the Missoula City Fire Department.

The Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to examine how other cities of similar size and character have resolved fire services issues arising from rapid growth and to determine whether fire services in the Missoula valley are effective as currently designed and delivered. This paper also assesses the merits of consolidating fire
services and offers recommendations regarding how to improve the provision of fire protection services in the Missoula valley.

Research Questions

In pursuing these purposes, the paper addresses the following research questions:

1. Is there a need for consolidation or merger of fire services in the Missoula valley?
2. What are the presumed advantages and disadvantages of consolidation/merger?
3. What is the political and economic feasibility of consolidation/merger?
4. If consolidation/merger is feasible, how might it best be achieved?
5. What type of fire delivery system would best meet the needs of the Missoula valley?

Research Methodology

Several methods were used to determine the effect that the integration of Missoula valley fire departments might have on fire services. These include a review of the literature on fire services consolidation, an examination of how other jurisdictions have consolidated, and interviews and surveys of politicians, fire service personnel, fire service board members, and community members with fire services involvement.
Fiscal, facility, and training impacts are determined through analysis of interviews with fire personnel in areas which have already completed consolidation of services, as well as areas which are in the process of consolidation. Surveys and interviews are used to identify the potential impacts of fire services consolidation or merger.
Since its establishment as a trading post in the late 1800s, Missoula's merchants and government officials have tried to encourage population growth in the Missoula valley. Although the lure of the west has always been rugged independence and freedom, people also demanded some of the services and protection offered in the bigger cities. One of the services that attracted new settlers was the promise and provision of fire protection services. As Missoula grew from a small trading post on the new frontier, so did the need for fire services. This chapter describes the establishment of city fire services in the Missoula valley, the development of Missoula Rural Fire District, the history of the resentment between Missoula City Fire Department and Missoula Rural Fire District, and previous attempts to resolve the differences between the two agencies.

The Early Days

In the 1860s, Missoula emerged as a trade center for western Montana. A business district was established on North Higgins Avenue. Mercantile, stables, and residential areas developed as well as several newspapers which chronicled the events of the time. Being in an area of the country where winter

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1Information in this section was supplied by local historian, Mrs. Audra Browman, interview by author, Missoula, Montana, 28 July 1993.
outlasts summer by several months of each year, fires were bound to be an issue. When winter set in, businesses and residences alike stoked up fireplaces and furnaces in order to keep warm. As the town of Missoula grew, so did the incidence of chimney fires. In the early years there was no established fire service and residents were forced to draw water from the river or the surrounding creeks and hope for the best results. Sometimes efforts were successful. At other times buildings burned to the ground while residents struggled to douse the flames. In harsh winters, residents were almost helpless in dealing with fires. Often, they could do little more than "hurl curses and ice at it" (Browman, 1993). In 1877, residents attempted to start a bucket brigade. Eighteen people enrolled for a hook and ladder company, but the unit did not come into existence. It is likely that lack of funding may have been the cause.

The need for better fire services increased as the city grew. In 1879, a local newspaper warned readers to "look out for fires." The paper reported that buildings were packed close together and "few know where our poor excuse for fire apparatus is" (Missoulian, Oct. 3, 1879). At the same time city officials were calling for the development of a reservoir or cistern to be used as an emergency water supply. A water supply reservoir had been built in 1875 by the Missoula Water Works Company, but it did not provide sufficient supply for emergency use. There were no hydrants and pressure was low in the cisterns.

Missoula's woeful lack of fire services brought calls for a fire company from the Missoula County Times editorial staff. The paper stated that the town needed a
fire company and noted that "it didn't even have a bucket, let alone a hydrant, or hose" (1884). A meeting was organized in June to discuss the creation of a hook and ladder company. By July, the town adopted the laws necessary for establishing a hook and ladder company. Andrew Logan became the first captain of the Missoula Fire Company, and B.C. Benson and George H. Sweeney became the 1st and 2nd assistants. There is no record whether these men were paid, but it was reported by the Missoulian that the hose company would be limited to 30 members, almost certainly all volunteers. With the establishment of a hose company hydrants were installed in the business district. By 1911, some members of the fire company were apparently paid employees. A Chamber of Commerce publication, circa 1912, reported that Missoula offered the services of a "paid fire department" to town residents.

The Growth Period

The quality of fire services continued to be an issue as Missoula grew. By 1922 Missoula had grown to a city of approximately 13,500. A report written by the Board of Fire Underwriters of the Pacific Municipal Fire Protection in the same year helps to paint a picture of fire services in the early 1900s.

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2 Many of the quoted articles came from Missoula City Fire Department scrapbooks. While there are exact dates on newspaper articles, the newspaper titles were missing, and are not included.
It listed the following record of fire alarms and losses between 1917 and 1922:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alarms</th>
<th>Total Loss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 1st to December 31st, 1917......</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1st to December 31st, 1918......</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1st to December 31st, 1919......</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1st to December 31st, 1920......</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1st to December 31st, 1921......</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1st to April 30th, 1922.........</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The report also discussed the layout of the city, the water system, the make-up of the fire department, and recommendations for improvement of fire protection. Water was supplied through a single, 30-inch, continuous wood-stave pipe and there were 158 public hydrants in town. It was reported that while the hydrants were in good condition, the pressure and flow was poor. The make-up of the fire department consisted of "nine full paid men, three call men, a chief and an assistant chief" (Board of Underwriters report, 1922). Fire service employees were allowed 15 days annual vacation and were not allowed to leave the city when off duty without the permission of the chief. Fire apparatus was motorized and consisted of one chief's car (a Ford Roadster with a truck body), one American-La France triple combination pumper, hose, and chemical truck, one Seagrave automobile combination hose and chemical truck, one Seagrave trussed frame ladder truck, and one second size Nott steamer. All of the apparatus ran out of one station which was located on the corner of Stevens and Main Street in the heart of the business district. The report concluded that "fire protection had not increased proportionately with the growth of the city, [and] sufficient appropriations are not made to provide an adequate force, the number of paid men being too small to man the apparatus in service." It also
cited a concern about the rapidly growing south side of the city and the fact that there was only one fire station. Recommendations in the 1922 report included the building of a southside fire station, an increase in manpower, and construction of a drill tower to insure the quality of training of fire-fighters.

A representative from the Board of Fire Underwriters of the Pacific Coast named Charles W. Cook addressed the Kiwanis club in 1923 on the condition of fire services in Missoula. The fire-fighting infrastructure received low marks from Cook: "The fire department we found even more deficient than the water system...this is not a reflection on the men, for I commend them upon the excellent work they are doing considering the condition under which they are laboring" (June 7, 1923). This situation prevailed for several years to follow. There were hard-working, efficient employees in the Missoula City Fire Department, but apparatus and manpower were woefully lacking. In a May 7th, 1925 news article, Chief James T. Cranney wrote to the residents that "Missoula, of course, has a good fire department. Perhaps the size of its personnel and the extent of its equipment are measures of our ability to pay for, but it seems to us that there should never be any thought of reducing the efficiency and strength of the department in any way, but that, rather we should be planning all of the time to make the department even stronger. This would be the best sort of fire insurance."

The Board of Fire Underwriters recommended again in 1927 that Missoula upgrade equipment, build a new station south of the Clark Fork River, increase manpower, enact a new building code, and replace the water supply system (news
article, December 9, 1927). The fire department consisted of 12 paid staff members while the report recommended 54. Missoula continued to grow, but the fire department remained small. There were many fires and fire-fighters did the best they could with limited manpower and apparatus.

When a housing boom hit Missoula in 1929 the Board of Fire Underwriters began an ad campaign which described the lack of adequate fire services and the increasing probability of catastrophe in Missoula. This reflected a movement to make the public more aware of the low level of staffing and equipment in the fire service. 1932 brought a ten percent cut in salary to the fire department due to the Depression, but by 1933, there was renewed hope for improved fire services. A local newspaper reported that "Missoula will be the scene of considerable building activity... as contractors and others engaged in the building trades begin to see the light in clouds of depression" (news article, April 30th, 1933). Missoula Fire Department salaries were restored to 1931 levels and the city council granted permission to improve fire services by repairing the fire station.

Missoula continued to experience a housing boom throughout the 1930s and the city government began to consider annexation of newly developing residential areas as a means of insuring fire protection and other services. Houses within city limits were covered by city fire services, but residents living beyond the borders were left without fire protection. Annexations, although seen as necessary by city government officials, were viewed as hostile take-over attempts by rural residents.

One of the developing areas of the Missoula valley which the city wanted to
annex was called Orchard Homes. Because the city fire department could not legally respond to fires outside of the city limits, there was little or no fire protection for rural residents. As a possible solution to the problem, a group of residents known as the Orchard Homes County Life Club set about trying to organize a volunteer fire department in March of 1939. A Missoulian editorial suggested that a fire district be created and a city-county fire truck be used for rural fires. The Orchard Homes Volunteer Fire Department began operating when several people from the County Life Club mounted two 35 gallon and one 40 gallon chemical fire extinguishers on a Ford truck. Herbert Hughes was appointed Fire Chief and the Missoula City Fire Department promised to train volunteers once the department became more organized. The Orchard Homes Volunteer Fire Department responded to its first house fire in 1940.

The Missoula City Fire Department continued to struggle with staffing and equipment throughout the 1940s. In 1941, S. R. Waugh, a representative from the Board of Fire Underwriters commented that "the fire department personnel here is fine, but even the finest watchmaker can't make a watch without tools" (Missoulian, Dec 4, 1941). There still was no fire station on the south side of the Clark Fork river and only one pumper truck maintained by the Orchard Homes residents.

1942 brought a sudden and unexpected end to the Orchard Homes Volunteer Fire Department. On February 21, the Department responded to a fire at a local lumber yard. After extinguishing the fire, according to the report of city fire chief A. L. Quinn (Missoulian, Feb. 22, 1942), the department returned to the garage they
had built to house the pumper. It was a cold night and the hoses had frozen. In an
effort to thaw the hoses, the fire-fighters stoked the stove in the garage and went
home. Some time during the night, the garage caught fire. The city fire department
came to extinguish the flames, but the pumper was ruined. The fire brought an end
to the Orchard Homes Volunteer Fire Department.

Meanwhile the city of Missoula continued efforts to improve its fire
infrastructure. In 1942 the city sought to purchase new equipment through a
$35,000 bond issue, but World War II brought an end to that plan. Again, in 1949,
the calls for a new south side fire station arose in Missoula. The city proposed to
build a station on Stephens Avenue where Sacajawea Park stood, but the neighbors
protested and the effort died. Finally, the city approved the funding of $166,000 for
the building of two new fire stations in 1950, one on Pine street in the downtown
area and the other on the south side of the river on Mount avenue. Both stations
were built and opened in 1954. The city had its south side fire station thirty-two
years after it was first recommended. The city built one more station on the south
side of the river in 1977. Located on 39th Street, it was initially staffed with two
person crews in 1977.
Missoula Rural Fire Comes into Existence

The city of Missoula continued to expand into various valley pockets as the population increased, but areas outside of city limits still suffered from a lack of fire protection. Farmland was being subdivided and houses built. Missoula was becoming more urban as orchards became small neighborhoods. In 1960 the City of Missoula once again proposed to annex the Orchard Homes area of the valley. After the Orchard Homes Volunteer Fire Department failed, residents in the Orchard Homes area had been serviced by one 1939 engine which was located at Fort Missoula (on the south side of town). The matter of annexations is not one which is easily understood, but it does tend to raise the ire of people in the proposed annexation area. That was the case in Orchard Homes in 1960. Residents concerned about higher taxes and loss of rural character circulated petitions to protest the annexation. At the same time, residents proposed the creation of a rural fire district in order to protect the increasing residential areas in the rural sections of the valley. The protest succeeded and in late 1960 Missoula Rural Fire District was formed by petition of rural residents. The district initially covered an area of approximately five square miles from south of the Clark Fork River to the Bitterroot River.

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3 Chief Bill Reed, Missoula Rural Fire District, interview by author, Missoula, Montana, 17 August 1993.
The Missoula Rural Fire District was governed by a five person board of trustees. The first board hired a chief and two assistant chiefs. The rest of the organization consisted of 42 volunteers. The first fire station was located at 2135 South Third Avenue West and was equipped with a borrowed engine. Six months later, MRFD received a water tanker and a first line engine for the Third Avenue station.

MRFD had outgrown its station by 1962 and received enough financial support from district residents to build a new station. In October 1963 Missoula Rural Fire District moved into a new building on the corner of South avenue and Reserve street. As the district expanded its boundaries over the next few years, the need for more staff arose and in 1968 three more fire-fighters were hired as full-time employees. The number of volunteers increased as well to 80. A legal opinion in the 1940s stated that the Missoula City Fire Department could not respond outside of city limits. As a result, there were many areas within the Missoula valley that still had no fire protection. Some of these areas were the Rattlesnake Canyon to the north, Bonner to the east, Lolo to the south, and the airport area to the west. As it became evident that residential areas were expanding in those directions, Missoula Rural Fire began its expansion of fire protection services to additional areas.

The first expansion occurred in 1968 with the addition of a fire station in the Rattlesnake area and another station by the airport. The Rattlesnake was staffed primarily by volunteers, but in the 1970s MRFD hired a part-time paid staff to man the station for eight hours a day, five days a week. In 1971, MRFD opened a fourth
station in Bonner and hired three more full-time employees. Station five in Lolo was opened in 1973, and finally in 1982, station six opened in a residential section west of town on Mullan Road. Between MRFD, Clinton Rural Fire District, Frenchtown Rural District, Florence Volunteer Fire Department, and Arlee Volunteer Fire Department, most of the Missoula valley had some kind of fire protection by 1982. The U.S. Forest Service and the Department of State Lands also offered fire protection in the case of wildland fires. The animosity which developed between Missoula Rural Fire District and the Missoula City Fire Department, as well as attempts to resolve some of the differences are discussed in detail in the following section.

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*Information in this section was derived from several sources, including Missoula City Fire Department scrapbooks, Missoula Rural Fire Department scrapbooks, and phone interviews with relatives of previous fire department employees.*
The Rift

When the Missoula valley was relatively unpopulated, there was a clear need for two fire departments. Rural areas fell beyond the range of city fire services. The Missoula City Fire Department was mandated to cover only city residents. As population density increased on the valley floor, demand for fire services also increased. Both MRFD and MCFD increased staffing and services in an attempt to better serve the rising population. Over time, an uneasy relationship developed between the two departments. In order to better understand Missoula's current fire services situation, it is important to investigate the roots of the troubled relationship between MRFD and MCFD.

Pinpointing the exact cause of the animosity between the two fire departments or when it began is difficult. The fact that Missoula Rural Fire District began as a protest to annexation clearly set the stage for dispute. The growth of the two agencies also contributed to the development of separate identities. Missoula City Fire Department grew from a paid staff of three people and one station to a paid staff of 65 people and three stations (with an additional station being built currently). Missoula Rural Fire District grew from a staff of three paid employees, 42 volunteers, and one station to a staff of 26 paid employees, 78 volunteers, and six stations. Both departments developed strong senses of pride and integrity and became strong political voices in the community.

The rift between the two agencies widened as political boundaries between the city and county of Missoula changed over the years. As a result of annexations
by the city, neighborhoods that once fell under rural fire protection became part of
the city’s fire protection area. Annexed areas were often located adjacent to a
Missoula Rural Fire District station, but because there was no agreement between
MCFD and MRFD, those areas had to be serviced by the Missoula city fire services.
Conversely, rural residential areas nearly engulfed by city areas could not be
serviced by the city. Fire agency administrators on both sides dug in and tried to
protect their "turf."

Staffing and funding patterns created friction as well. Each agency sought to
increase staff in order to meet standards set by the National Fire Protection
Association. Missoula Rural Fire District relied on volunteers while Missoula City
Fire Department utilized paid firefighters in responding to calls. The question of
whether MRFDs use of volunteers legitimately substituted for a paid department
increased tension between the two fire agencies. Both sides engaged in "name
calling," arguing over which department was better ready to respond to emergency
situations. In addition, Missoula Rural Fire District made a conscious effort to fight
city annexations because of the loss of territory and revenues that would result.
Although these efforts were not aimed at the city fire department, they nonetheless
created an adversarial relationship between the two departments. As each agency
dug in, public safety sometimes became a casualty. For example, a house burned
down just outside of the city limits because the city fire department would not cross
the boundary. Fire department employees were not at fault. They had been told by
city officials not to respond to calls outside of the city limits. City officials stated that
the fire department was funded by city residents and responsible only to them.

Political intervention also widened the gap between fire services. Each agency is governed by a different political body and bound by a different set of regulations. City fire departments in Montana are established by ordinances created by city councils, while rural fire districts are established by petition of the taxpayers. The city of Missoula is required by law to provide a paid, full-time fire department, whereas Missoula County is not. The Missoula Rural Fire Department is governed by an elected board of trustees while the city fire department is governed by the city council. The two agencies serve different political masters despite the fact that they exist side by side. The uneasy twist of politics and fire services has created a balancing act between city administrators, fire officials, board members, council members, and county commissioners that a high wire performer would envy.

Powerful forces within the Missoula city government have strictly maintained that MCFD's mandate is to provide services only to tax paying city residents, while the MRFD board has insisted on continued growth. The inability of politicians to look beyond what is politically gainful has played a key role in the development of the rift between fire service providers in the Missoula valley.

Finally, controversial administrative decisions regarding protection of certain valley areas have also created increased feelings of distrust between fire service providers. For example, a northern section of the Missoula valley, called The Rattlesnake had been served by the Missoula Rural Fire District since 1968. In 1990, the city of Missoula annexed most of the populated areas of the Rattlesnake
valley. A mix of MCFD and MRFD coverage resulted, creating confusion for service providers and residents alike. The setup remains controversial to this day.

**Previous Resolution Efforts**

There have been numerous documented disagreements between fire chiefs, mayors, council members, and residents in regard to fire protection. Several people have made efforts to resolve some of the differences over the years. In 1984, for example, a mutual aid agreement was worked out between Missoula Rural Fire District, the U. S. Forest Service (Lolo National Forest), the Department of State Lands, and several rural fire services allowing each agency to respond to a fire emergency within any jurisdiction. MCFD, however, did not enter into the agreement.

Perhaps the most extensive recommendation for resolving the confusion in the Missoula valley came in 1986. In an effort to clarify the roles of each fire entity in the Missoula valley, a focus group comprised of local citizens, fire officials, business leaders, and elected officials was formed. The group, called the Missoula Citizens' Fire Master Planning Committee, released a report entitled *Missoula Fire And Emergency Services Master Plan*. The committee offered as a primary recommendation the creation of "a unified district encompassing all of the areas presently served by the East Missoula Rural Fire Department, the Missoula City Fire Department, and the Missoula Rural Fire Department." The committee concluded, "This unification is the only practical solution to district boundary problems and
would result in the most efficient use of equipment, stations, and manpower" (pg. iii, 1986). The committee also recommended full support for enabling legislation to allow a unified district. Alternatives such as an automatic aid agreement, automatic aid for special targets, and mutual aid were offered if the primary recommendation could not be fulfilled. The report also detailed recommendations on several aspects of fire services, including recommendations on fire and emergency services; training; disaster planning; University of Montana planning; station, training facilities, and apparatus; insurance; citizen participation; administration and finance; government and private agencies cooperation; and fire safety division. Although many hours were spent in developing the 1986 Master Plan, no fire agency followed through on the recommendations. According to current Missoula Fire Chief, Chuck Gibson, the Missoula City Council opposed a unified fire district because of a fear that current levels of service might not be maintained if fire services agencies unified.

A second attempt at unification occurred in 1987 when Paul Laisy, an administrator at MRFD, proposed an automatic aid response system between fire agencies. The Missoula City Council and the Mayor of Missoula, Bob Lovegrove, again opposed such an agreement. The Mayor stated that "One of the interests (in not agreeing) is that it reduces the rationale for annexation" (Missoulian, Nov. 29, 1987). Politics prevailed over public safety. In 1989, two MRFD volunteers, Kelly Close and Jon Agner, attempted to initiate a merger between the Missoula City Fire Department and the Missoula Rural Fire District. The Board of Trustees of MRFD
supported the initiative while the Missoula City Council opposed it. The City Council explained that county residents should not receive services from the city because they do not pay for those services. City officials said that, "city residents would pay for equipment that would benefit county residents and that the quality of protection might decline" (Missoulian, Nov. 2, 1989). The authors of the merger initiative attempted to place a proposal on the November, 1989 ballot, but decided to shelve the measure after meeting with resistance from MCFD union representatives.

It took the death of an employee of the Thatcher Chemical Company in Missoula and a threat of a lawsuit in 1992 to spur the enactment of an automatic aid agreement between Missoula City Fire Department and Missoula Rural Fire District. A Thatcher employee suffered a heart attack while at work. The building fell within Missoula Rural Fire's boundary so MRFD was dispatched to the incident. Dispatchers did not call city fire-fighters due to the lack of an automatic aid agreement between agencies. The woman subsequently died. Investigators determined that city fire-fighters could have reached the woman sooner than MRFD, possibly saving a life. Following the investigation, City and County officials signed an automatic aid agreement allowing for simultaneous dispatch of MRFD and MCFD service providers. The goal was to provide the quicker service for the public good. The automatic aid agreement continues at this time.
CHAPTER 3
CONSOLIDATION AS A POLICY OPTION

It is evident that the provision of fire services has developed erratically as the Missoula valley has grown. Although the goal of fire agencies is to provide for public safety above all, history shows that public safety has not always been the outcome of agency decisions. Agencies struggling for fiscal survival have fought for every available tax dollar. Consequently, planning has suffered as agencies plan from year to year instead of decade to decade. The lack of long term planning has resulted in unclear boundaries between city and county, leaving residents, government administrators, and fire personnel unsure of how to provide for public safety in the most efficient and effective manner. As a result, policy makers are now beginning to give serious attention to the possible benefits of consolidating fire services. This chapter introduces, defines, and discusses the positive and negative aspects of five consolidation policy options.

The Emergence of Consolidation as a Policy Option

In recent years, fire agencies have become more and more hampered by fiscal constraints and many of them have turned to consolidation as a policy option. Consolidation is not a new concept. Administrators proposed the concept in Contra Costa County, California as early as 1935 (Streuli, 1970). As towns grew into cities and boundaries lines became less distinct, consolidation of services made fiscal and
safety sense to administrators. As a result, fire service systems have become a
prime testing ground for various consolidation models. Administrators in the states
of Washington, Oregon, Florida, and California have become leaders in developing
protocols for the consolidation of fire services.

Caution in policy-making is the trademark of a wise administrator. In
assessing the pros and cons of fire service consolidation, administrators must
understand that success cannot be guaranteed. According to Allen et al. (1986), the
data to support consolidation cannot be derived until the process actually unfolds.
Unpredictable factors specific to each locale may influence the outcome of a
consolidation effort. Administrators may also make and act upon incorrect
assumptions. In order to reduce unpredictability, the authors suggest that
administrators undertake a comprehensive study before initiating a
consolidation/merger effort.

Political influence can also interfere with a consolidation effort. According to
Blackwell et al. (1983), administrators should investigate four factors before initiating
reform: resistance to change, autonomy and identity issues, interjurisdictional
considerations, and employee issues. To alleviate resistance to change,
administrators should create an advisory committee to gather and disseminate
information in a positive manner. Regarding issues of autonomy and identity, the
authors suggest that administrators should take care not to strip communities or fire
departments of their identities. Dealing with interjurisdictional concerns is also
paramount. Administrators should account for such issues prior to initiation of any
consolidation effort. Any effort must be a joint initiative if success is to be achieved. Finally, the authors recommend that administrators handle personnel issues early in the process in order to gain the support and cooperation of employees.

Floyd Pittard and Jack Snook, employees of The Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue agency in Aloha, Oregon, have developed several guides to assist other agencies in consolidating fire services. In 1990, Pittard produced "A Systematic Approach to Fire Service Consolidation and Merger." Although the manual is not a polished piece of work, it offers a structured guideline to the consolidation process. The author discusses several aspects of consolidation, including how to assess the need for consolidation, determine the advantages and disadvantages, assign task forces, deal with the media, and other intricacies of fire service consolidation. The report includes many sample documents and a case study of the development of the Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue agency.

Five Policy Options

Leading the field in defining methods of consolidation is the Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue agency. In 1993, it released a report which defined four of the five options described below. The fifth option is defined below as the status quo

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5"Merger/Consolidation" (Photocopy), June 1993, Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue, Aloha, Oregon, 2.
option. There are negative and positive aspects to each of the five policy options. This section will identify various aspects of each option and discuss how service providers might be affected by choosing each one.

**Status Quo.** The status quo option is defined as the continuation of the current system of fire services. By choosing this option, service providers such as Missoula City Fire Department, Missoula Rural Fire District, Frenchtown Fire District, East Missoula Fire Department, Clinton Fire Department, Florence Fire Department, and Seeley Lake Fire Department would retain their independent status. The Automatic Aid Agreement between MCFD and MRFD would remain in effect.

The positive aspects of opting for the status quo are threefold. First, the Automatic Aid Agreement provides for a quick response to emergency calls. Second, each agency retains its autonomy, individuality, and integrity. Finally, by choosing the status quo, elected officials are not placed at political risk.

There are several negative aspects attached to the status quo option. First, the public may not receive the best possible level of service. As discussed earlier, the current system does not always allow firefighters to respond as effectively as possible. Also, political differences will continue to exist. Each fire agency will maintain independent administration, restricting the creation of a more efficient service. Differences in operating standards will continue to stir controversy as well. On joint fire calls, for example, fire-fighters may operate using different standards. The resulting confusion could jeopardize the safety of the people involved. Another consequence of choosing the status quo is that geographical boundaries remain
unclear. Taxpayers, dispatchers, firefighters, and administrators may be unsure about fire agency responsibilities. The resulting confusion, once again, jeopardizes the safety of all involved. Finally, competing fire agencies will continue to promote the duplication of services and equipment. The result is increased cost to the public.

By choosing the status quo option, administrators can expect the fire service situation in Missoula to intensify. "Turf wars" between providers will interfere with orderly growth in the valley. In the struggle for survival, fire agencies will contribute to a dysfunctional system of fire services due to a lack of effective planning. As valley residents recognize the duplication in services and equipment, they will demand a better use of tax dollars. As a result, fire agencies may be asked to maintain current levels of service with less funding.

A clear pattern of agency entrenchment emerges when questions of boundaries or funding arise. Administrative concerns over boundary issues will create conflict as new residents demand increased services. At the same time, fire agencies will probably be unable to meet those demands due to a lack of resources. Although the Automatic Aid Agreement may resolve many past concerns in regard to response times, the Automatic Aid agreement does not address the level of staffing required to insure the safety of both victim and fire-fighter.

Functional Consolidation. The second option is called a functional consolidation and is defined as "one where separate fire departments are retained, but one or more duties performed by one department are assigned to employees of
another department." An example of a functionally consolidated service in Missoula is the hazardous materials team. Developed by the Missoula Rural Fire District, the "haz-mat" team responds to calls throughout the Missoula area. Other fire services, however, are duplicated by agencies in the Missoula valley. As examples, both MCFD and MRFD offer arson investigation, public education, training, inspection, emergency medical services, and fire suppression programs as public services.

In a functional consolidation, agencies would agree to provide a portion of services within the valley. The Missoula City Fire Department, for example, might be responsible for fire suppression, training, and arson investigation while Missoula Rural Fire District might specialize in public education, emergency medical services, and building inspections. Agencies would need to negotiate specific agreements.

By consolidating fire services in this way, administrators can expect some positive changes. First, administrators can expect their agency to retain its autonomy, individuality, and integrity. Agency names would remain the same, as would the administrative and funding structures. Administrators could also reduce the duplication of services, equipment, and apparatus through a functional consolidation. By specializing, each agency could reduce duplicate equipment and increase funding for specialized equipment. Agencies could offer improved services

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in a more effective and efficient manner. A functional consolidation also allows fire service agencies to avoid the legal complications of a full merger. Most aspects of a functional consolidation can occur within the existing legal system. Lastly, by choosing to functionally consolidate, administrators are forced to examine the current service delivery system. Changes in service delivery will likely lead to a more efficient fire service due to the elimination of duplicated services, equipment, and personnel.

There are negative aspects involved in a functional consolidation as well. For example, agencies may limit resources in a functional consolidation, significantly slowing response times on calls. Also, service providers are still constrained by political boundaries. Administrators may not address the issue of confusion over boundaries, leaving fire-fighters and dispatchers to iron out disputed issues. In choosing the functional consolidation option, administrators may also have to eliminate certain personnel positions due to duplication. If not presented correctly, fire-fighters may perceive reorganization negatively. Fire-fighters may also perceive a loss of status because of changing roles and titles. Administrators operating under different philosophies may also confuse both firefighters and the public.

By choosing to functionally consolidate, administrators can expect certain outcomes. Agencies choosing this option will create highly specialized service components within each organization. By specializing, agencies will likely concentrate funding into specific areas, eliminating much of the duplication that exists today. The public will receive improved service in certain areas due to
specialization. Providers, however, may respond slower to calls due to greater travel distances (depending on the nature of the emergency). Despite the existence of the Automatic Aid Agreement, responders will continue to be confused by boundary issues.

**Partial Consolidation.** Partial consolidation involves retaining separate fire departments while forming a special group to handle specific duties. The situation with the Rattlesnake fire station in Missoula is an example of a partial consolidation. MCFD supplies an engine and crew twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, while MRFD keeps equipment at the same station and respond to calls by manning equipment with volunteers. Both crews respond to calls in the Rattlesnake area.

In choosing the partial consolidation option, administrators can expect several positive changes. First, this option allows administrators to offer quick response times and a known level of staffing. Fire service providers can also work together without going through a full consolidation process. Each agency can retain its autonomy, individuality, and integrity. When agencies partially consolidate services, insurance rates typically decrease due to better ratings. In King County, Washington, the insurance rating dropped from a class eight to a class five immediately following a fire services consolidation. Finally, fire service providers in

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7Ibid, p. 2.
partially consolidated agencies will have more opportunity for joint training exercises. Residents can expect better service from better trained fire service providers.

A partially consolidated program is not without negative aspects, however. First, administrators can expect problems due to differences in organizational cultures. Each agency, over a period of years, develops an identity, or culture, which each staff member owns. Breaking cultural barriers is a difficult task for any administrator. Responders will also continue to operate under different standards, resulting in possible confusion on the emergency scene. Finally, agencies will continue to purchase duplicate equipment and apparatus.

Agencies choosing the partial consolidation option can expect certain outcomes. Friction between agencies will potentially increase due to competition, lack of cooperation, and confusion among personnel on emergency scenes. Relations between personnel, however, may improve due to shared living space and joint operations and training. Funding will likely be a concern to administrators because of duplication in both personnel and equipment. Agencies will not realize a redistribution of resources because each entity will continue to operate independently. Another potential outcome is that different elected bodies will govern fire agencies, leading again to confusion and competition among service providers.

**Operational Consolidation.** Operational consolidation is similar to a couple living together without being married. It occurs when separate fire departments
combine to share equipment, living quarters, and geographical response areas.³ Each agency may continue to have its own equipment, apparatus, and personnel, but may be interspersed within the service area. For example, a fire station may have two engines and four employees. Crews and engines may come from different agencies, but any or all may respond to calls. Agencies may have different payroll systems and different funding mechanisms.

Administrators choosing the operational consolidation option can expect several positive outcomes. First, as was the case with partial consolidation, insurance companies may lower residential rates because of improved coverage. Agencies would benefit once again from joint training opportunities. Unlike those choosing a partial consolidation, agencies involved in an operational consolidation can alleviate political boundaries and reassess geographical borders. Another benefit is the reduction of service cost. Despite having different payroll systems and funding sources, fire service providers can offer improved service in a more efficient and effective manner, resulting in taxpayer savings. Administrators can eliminate redundant personnel positions, again saving valuable dollars. Finally, by choosing the operational consolidation option, administrators can work within the current legal framework. Most states allow fire agencies to operate under a cooperative arrangement of this kind.

There are few negative aspects in the operational consolidation option. Two

³Ibid, p. 2.
come to mind. In choosing to operationally consolidate, agencies may get caught up in funding battles. Each agency must rely on its own mechanism and may be forced to fight for valuable resources. The other negative aspect is that agencies will continue to provide separate retirement and benefit packages. It is likely that personnel will respond negatively to the differences in the packages.

There are several potential outcomes if fire agencies choose to operationally consolidate. One outcome may be a reorganization in both MCFD and MRFD personnel. Agencies may reduce duplicated positions, allowing for the creation of new service areas such as EMS or communication services. There would be less friction and competition between both political entities and fire personnel. Personnel from both agencies may function as teams or crews. Each agency would function under a distinctive funding mechanism, resulting in continued confusion for both administrators and citizens. Service to the public, however, would likely improve due to the creation of a more effective delivery system. Agencies free to sell duplicated apparatus could increase revenue. Also, by standardizing equipment, agencies could purchase supplies at a lower cost, saving valuable resources. Finally, in operationally consolidating, agencies could standardize operating procedures. The result would be a reduction of fire scene confusion and an improvement in public safety.

**Merger.** A merger is similar to a marriage. It is "the combining of two or more governmental agencies through a *legal process* with the output being a single
The outcome of a merger is a newly defined, single agency which has been created through the process of law. Merged agencies fall under one funding mechanism, benefit package, retirement system, and payroll program. It covers the geographical area once covered by separate agencies.

The merger option has several positive aspects to it. In choosing to merge, agency administrators create a new fire service delivery system complete with a new name and history. The delivery system is simplified because agencies no longer need to consider boundary issues. Insurance companies would likely lower rates due to improved coverage, resulting in improved residential service at a lowered cost. By participating in the merger process, administrators have the opportunity to improve the system. As is the case with operational consolidation, administrators can also reduce duplication in a merged agency. Leaders can sell, reassign, or reorganize duplicate apparatus, personnel and equipment.

Agencies choosing to merge should expect few negative results. Two probable results are that personnel can expect to wait longer for promotional opportunities and some positions may be eliminated. With careful planning and inclusion, administrators can smooth the transition for personnel.

Despite the potential benefits, consolidation is not easily achieved. Administrators need to be aware of the constraints that may hamper a consolidation

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9Ibid, p. 2. 

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effort. Political attitudes, political boundaries, fear of change, fear of job loss, attitudes of fire service personnel, fiscal concerns, differences in wages and benefit packages, and differing administrative philosophies all may interfere with a smooth transition. The next chapter assesses the need for change in Missoula County, and the final chapter offers recommendations regarding which of these options should be pursued.
CHAPTER 4
ASSESSING MISSOULA'S FIRE SERVICES IN 1993

Dissatisfaction with the current design of fire services is causing political leaders, agency administrators, and citizens to look seriously at alternative arrangements. In January of 1993, Mayor Dan Kemmis and the City Council of Missoula commissioned a study to assess the current design of fire services in the Missoula valley, alternative fire service delivery systems, and available models of consolidation/merger. The results of this study are reported in this chapter.

Method of Analysis

Two surveys were designed to assist in answering the questions posed in Chapter 1. The first survey was designed to determine the current level of satisfaction with Missoula’s fire services, bring forth ideas for redesigning fire services, assess some of the advantages and disadvantages of a possible merger or consolidation, and determine the challenges in providing fire services over the next twenty years. The survey was distributed to people residing in or near the Missoula valley who have had a strong involvement with fire services.

The second survey, a follow-up tool, was distributed to fire service personnel in agencies in other states that are in the process of, or have completed, a consolidation effort. The survey was designed to determine advantages and disadvantages of consolidation, average length of time needed in consolidation
efforts, positive and negative impacts on fire services, barriers in the process, recommendations for assisting other agencies considering consolidation, and which personnel or agencies took a leadership role in the process. Both surveys were designed to examine issues of cost savings, duplication of services, existence of artificial boundaries, and opportunity to expand services.

Missoula Survey Summaries

The fire services survey for the Missoula valley was sent to one hundred people who have some knowledge or connection with fire services. Included in the sample were city council members, rural fire board members, adjoining fire district fire chiefs, police and sheriff's department representatives, business owners, university employees, elected officials, and an equal number (25 each) of Missoula City and Rural fire agency personnel. The rate of return was forty-three percent and the average years of residence in Missoula County for respondents was twenty-six.

Current Level of Satisfaction. In order to determine whether a shift in policy is needed, it is important to assess the current level of satisfaction with fire services in the Missoula valley. The first section of the survey, "Awareness," was designed to measure respondent levels of satisfaction with the current fire delivery system and reasons for perceived dissatisfaction. As shown in table 1, despite varying points of view regarding the current design of fire services in the Missoula valley and what should be done to change it, a clear majority of respondents expressed
dissatisfaction with the current design.

Table 1: Level of Satisfaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>74.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reasons for respondent dissatisfaction can be divided into three distinct categories: lack of cooperation, need to consolidate, and inefficient use of tax dollars. Table 2 indicates the percent of respondents who cited each of these reasons in their written comments.

Table 2: Reasons for Dissatisfaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for dissatisfaction</th>
<th>Lack of cooperation</th>
<th>Need to consolidate</th>
<th>Inefficient use of tax dollars</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Redesigning Services.** In keeping with current trends toward empowerment, the Missoula survey was designed to elicit ideas from respondents for improving the fire delivery system. In the survey section called, "No Borders," respondents were called on to designate new fire service boundaries and explain why those boundaries might offer advantages and disadvantages.

Respondents suggested several ideas for redesigning boundaries. Table 3 provides the percent of respondents who cited each of several policy options.
Table 3: Proposals for Redesigning Service Area Boundaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County lines</th>
<th>Base on population and/or tax base</th>
<th>Metro, urban, and rural redesign</th>
<th>Extend area to Frenchtown, Bonner, and Lolo</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Redesign</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Redesigning services based on population and/or tax base and creating a metro, urban, and rural system are related. Respondents wrote that administrators could create a tiered system of metropolitan, urban, and rural districts. Each district could offer a different level of service based on population and tax base.

Analysis of open-ended responses to a question regarding advantages for redesigning fire services in the Missoula valley revealed two primary categories. Table 4 provides the percent of respondents citing each as an advantage.

Table 4: Advantages to Redesign

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Redesign advantages</th>
<th>Better use of tax dollars</th>
<th>Increased, improved services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A Need for Change: Present and Future. The "Assessment" section of the survey was designed to measure opinions on whether there is a need for change in Missoula’s fire delivery service system and whether there will be a need for change during the next ten to twenty years. Respondents were also asked to assess the biggest challenges in meeting fire service delivery needs of Missoula residents over
the next twenty years. Tables 5, 6, and 7 display survey responses.

Table 5: Need for Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is there a need for change?</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 shows, once again, a mandate for change. This mandate may reflect the recent population increase in the Missoula valley and the resultant stress on current fire service providers.

Survey respondents also recognize the need for future change, as depicted in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Need for Future Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is there a need for change over the next 10-20 years?</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked what might be the biggest challenge in meeting the fire service needs of Missoula residents over the next twenty years, respondents identified three major challenges. The results, as presented in Table 7, show that funding fire services and the achievement of cooperation between various fire service providers may provide the greatest challenge for administrators in the near future.
Table 7: Greatest Challenge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Funding</th>
<th>Growth</th>
<th>Cooperation</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greatest challenge</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>over next 20 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Barriers to Change.** As administrators face the challenges of dealing with growth and reduced funding, barriers to change will become apparent. The "Current Concerns" section of the surveys was designed to determine what those barriers might be. With regard to the section on challenges, respondents were asked to check any barriers that they thought might apply. The results reflect the option of checking more than one barrier from a list of fifteen choices.

Table 8: Barriers to Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Political boundaries</th>
<th>Fear of change</th>
<th>Animosity between agencies</th>
<th>Political attitudes</th>
<th>Employ-ee attitudes</th>
<th>Fear of job loss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to change</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Positive Aspects.** In the final section on the survey of the survey, respondents were asked to check any items (from a list of thirteen) which they felt might be positive aspects of a redesign in fire services. Table 9 reflects the five most frequently selected options and the percent of respondents selecting each one.
Table 9: Positive Aspects of Redesign

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Service increase</th>
<th>Standardized training</th>
<th>Improved resource utilization</th>
<th>Reduction in duplication</th>
<th>Standardized service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive aspects</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(For complete survey results, see Appendix A).

Survey of Agencies in Other States:

Surveys were sent to twelve fire agencies that recently consolidated, or are in the process of consolidation. Five surveys were completed and returned with two of the five coming from one fire department (Issaquah, Washington). Three surveys were returned by the postal service due to insufficient addresses. The rate of completed returns was forty-two percent. Despite the fact that surveys were mailed to a variety of regions throughout the United States, completed surveys came from only the States of Washington and Oregon.

Consolidation efforts from start to finish on the average took twenty-six and a half months. Two respondents were either in the process of a first consolidation/merger effort, or in the process of additional mergers.

Positive and Negative Impacts of Consolidation. Survey respondents suggested similar positive and negative impacts of fire service consolidation. Positive impacts on fire services in consolidated agencies include lower cost, reduced taxes, reduced manpower, full commitment to programs, improved and
standardized training, immediate upgrade of safety equipment, increased manning, improved insurance ratings, upgraded equipment, standardization of apparatus, equipment and operations, greater political power, improved cost efficiency, and improved response times.

The negative impacts listed by respondents were few. They included fewer initial promotions, continued competitive attitudes, and inability to release ownership of programs.

**A Smoother Transition.** The follow-up survey was designed to evoke suggestions for achieving a smooth transition during a consolidation effort. Once again, there was consistency in the replies. Survey respondents identified several ideas which might assist consolidating fire agencies. Among their answers, respondents wrote not to place so much trust in each department's chief, keep politics out of the process, and do not involve chiefs at all.

Respondents offered other suggestions for bringing about a steady change. Administrators should give lots of lead time, be flexible and creative, involve labor and policy makers early in the process, be open-minded by looking beyond how things have always been done, and recognize that cost savings may not occur. Administrators should also be well-prepared, run a strong public education and relations campaign before going to the voters, build a NEW system (fire service), change the agency name immediately, and talk only about the new agency.

Respondents also suggest that decision-makers should mix employees of
consolidated agencies, utilize outside (unbiased) expertise, be honest, communicate with all involved people as the process evolves, and involve department personnel in task groups. If administrators seek a smooth transition, they should inventory every function of involved departments and select the best available options, involve elected officials in every detail of benefits and cost, try to stay on a schedule, respect the feelings and opinions of others, and assign ONE person as the media person. One respondent also suggested giving people three choices from the beginning; become involved and support the process, fight the process and yield if you are losing, or if you don’t like the results, quit.

Disadvantages and Advantages of Consolidation. Policy-makers considering a fire service consolidation should have a clear picture of what the result of the effort might offer to the community. In an effort to clarify that picture, the survey was designed to illicit a variety of possible advantages and disadvantages resulting from a consolidation effort.

There were not many disadvantages listed in the results. Respondents identified as possible disadvantages a perceived loss of control by elected officials, differences in fire apparatus color, discrepancies in levels of service and taxes, and a perceived a loss of administrative power.

In contrast, fire administrators listed numerous consolidation advantages. Among the advantages respondents stated that a consolidated agency gets help to the public quicker, minimizes duplication, and increases efficiency. In consolidating,
administrators found that the new agency provided employees with a sense of a viability and allowed them to look forward to a new department. Consolidation also allowed administrators to reduce overhead costs, improve training and personnel packages, increase purchasing power, enrich bond authority, exert more political influence, expand fire programs, and take advantage of better data collection opportunities.

(For complete survey results, see Appendix B).

**Interviews**

Interviews were conducted throughout the duration of the study. Fire Chiefs from the Missoula Rural Fire District and the Missoula City Fire Department were interviewed on the history of fire services, the development of the enmity between the departments, and the current status of fire services. Audra Browman, a Missoula historian was interviewed on the history of fire services in the Missoula valley, as was Stan Cohen, a Missoula historical writer.

In terms of interviews with fire service agencies that have experienced a consolidation effort, an interview was conducted with Assistant Chief Lee Soptich of King County Fire Protection District #10, in Washington. During the interview,

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Assistant Chief Soptich identified several of the same advantages and disadvantages of consolidation as the Follow-up survey respondents. When asked about issues of growth and infrastructure, the Assistant Chief said that local law requires housing developers to pay for infrastructure items such as sewers, fire stations, and fire equipment. He added that after consolidating, administrators at King County Fire Protection District #10 began managing the agency like a business in that they encourage and initiate money saving ideas which sometimes result in financial profit. Two ideas specifically discussed were hiring an architect to design new stations and enforce building codes, and hiring a radio repair person instead of contracting with outside entities. According to the Assistant Chief, the architect and the radio repair person both provide services for outside sources, resulting in additional income for the district. The District splits the profits with the employees and has recently begun to show a profit.

Assistant Chief Soptich emphasized the value in reorganizing staff, guaranteeing employment, and guaranteeing wages in any consolidation, or merger. He expressed a need for preserving the integrity of involved personnel.
CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Missoula valley has become a complicated mix of boundaries with fire, sewer, and other infrastructural services crossing the boundaries in several locations. Over the years, many articles have been written in the local paper, The Missoulian, which relate residents needs and desires for long range planning in the provision of Missoula’s fire services. It is time to put aside political differences and determine what system will best serve the public interest in terms of providing fire services.

A Need for Consolidation?

The question of need in regard to fire services consolidation is one which cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Currently, Missoula’s fire service providers are not serving valley residents in the most effective and efficient way possible. Agencies offer many duplicated services. For example, both MRFD and MCFD tender hazardous materials teams, arson investigation teams, and training coordinators. There is duplication in apparatus as well as supply equipment. This duplication represents a costly use of taxpayer funds.

Concerns about public safety have also been raised. The Automatic Aid Agreement between MRFD and MCFD signed in 1992 lessened concerns about response times but staffing levels and boundaries remain at issue. Population has
continued to increase rapidly in the Missoula valley, particularly over the past three years. Fire agencies have not kept pace. Missoula City Fire Department is in the process of building two new fire stations in order to address some of the growing concerns. Missoula Rural Fire District has struggled to maintain an adequate amount of employees and volunteers to provide a safe level of coverage. A high percentage of fire service personnel has expressed concern that the current level of coverage is lacking. It is clear that the fire services question in Missoula must be studied in depth and alternatives must be developed. There is enough evidence showing a high level of dissatisfaction with the current fire services system to warrant moving ahead with the consolidation process.

Political and Economic Feasibility

No merger or consolidation of fire services can take place without a total commitment from all involved parties. That includes elected officials, fire service personnel, labor unions, media members, and the general public. The literature, as well as personal interviews by the author, clearly point out that without the complete backing of all parties, any merger/consolidation effort is doomed to fail. Political timing, public relations, and luck factor into the success of any effort. If Missoula officials decide to go forth with a merger/consolidation effort, all factors listed above must be considered.

Administrators must also determine the economic feasibility of a merger/consolidation. That step can be accomplished through the creation of a task
force. The task force should seek to determine possible outcomes of any effort. This predictive process serves as an educated guess more than anything else. The actual economics involved cannot be determined until after a change in the fire services delivery system is made.

**Procedural Recommendations**

In moving forward, administrators should consider several recommendations:

1. Missoula fire service administrators should establish a minimum level of manning for all valley agencies. NFPA recommends five fire-fighters per engine, but that may be an unrealistic expectation due to funding challenges.

2. Administrators should select a system which provides the best overall level of service for the public. That step can be accomplished by adopting a creative and open-minded approach to problem solving. By encouraging all involved parties to participate, administrators should be able to develop a workable strategy for addressing fire service issues.

3. In order to encourage support from fire service personnel, administrators should guarantee personnel and wage levels. Fire service employees must feel protected if policy-makers wish to achieve a successful change.

4. Open communication should be maintained. Involved parties need to sense that they can express opinions without fear of retribution. An atmosphere of openness between all involved parties will certainly aid administrators as the consolidation process evolves.
5. Once a decision has been made, all involved parties should unite behind the proposal. Without full support, any consolidation effort will likely fail.

6. Administrators should research each option carefully in order to prevent later problems. By considering long-term growth trends for the valley, policy makers can plan ahead and seek out sensible options for the future of Missoula.

Conclusion

Any discussion of fire services must begin and end with one question: what is best for the citizens of the valley? In order to answer that question, administrators need to study current policy, recommend change, and act upon those recommendations.

Because of the history of conflict between MCFD and MRFD, decision makers might consider hiring an outside consultant to assist in the process. In the eyes of the involved parties, a consultant might be seen as objective and unbiased. The Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue agency in Oregon has developed a solid model (see Appendix C) for dealing with consolidation/merger issues. Missoula officials need not start from scratch.

The Missoula fire survey discussed in Chapter 4 offered several suggestions for solutions to the fire delivery question. The ideas of a three-tiered system and a Missoula metro system are worth exploring. The key to successfully developing a new system may be in setting tough standards for task force committee members. Members must be open-minded and willing to consider options which may adversely
affect their own positions. Change causes stress, but stress can be positive if viewed in a positive light.

Missoula's fire delivery system is in need of change. The need is evidenced in the history of the agencies, current feelings of fire service employees, and patterns of growth in the Missoula valley. It is time for Missoula officials to put the past behind and look to providing a safe, solid fire delivery system for the citizens of the Missoula valley. People within the system may have to endure some growing pains, but the outcome of a more effective system should ease the overall pain.
APPENDIX A

MISSOULA FIRE SERVICES SURVEY RESULTS

43 RESPONSES OUT OF A POSSIBLE 100

AWARENESS:

1. How long have you lived in Missoula County?
   26 years avg.

2. Are you aware of how fire services are provided in the Missoula Valley?
   100% yes

3. Are you satisfied with the current design of fire services in the Missoula Valley?
   18.6% yes
   74.4% no
   7.0% other

4. If yes, why?
   - MRFD is equipped for rural fires; city is equipped for city fires
   - Prompt professional service; top equipment in good condition; well-trained full-time personnel (MCFD) (2)
   - Have not been involved in any unusual incidents which discredited agencies
   - Pleased with closest response agreement; like joint training exercises (2)
   - Able to deliver efficient services with 3 person crews (MCFD)
   - Densely populated areas pay more and receive higher level of service (2)
   - Fire services handled efficiently, thoroughly, and adequately; high praise for both fire organizations
   - Evolved over years with much give and take; people in MSLA area receive as good fire & EMS service as anyone in the Pacific Northwest
   - Should be a division between rural & urban; county cannot afford to pay for equal service
   - City engines respond within 10 minutes on 90% of calls, allowing quick initial attack

5. If no, why not?
   - Two agencies should consolidate (5)
   - Lack of cooperation between agencies; duplication of services, personnel, and equipment (5)
   - Current design provides more manpower & equipment than necessary on some calls (2)
   - Annexation has caused dangerously long response times (2)
(not satisfied, con't)
- No long range planning to provide best service at least cost (2)
- Service could be improved by combining to form a single response agency for the valley and eventually, the entire county (2)
- MRFD response slowed by use of volunteers
- General public is not receiving best possible emergency services
- MRFD manning level is insufficient; MRFD does not respond with adequate manning on closest response calls
- Lower level of training and expertise in MRFD on calls
- MRFD is unnecessary and provides a false sense of security
- Political boundaries slow services; not cost effective use of tax dollars (3)
- Fire stations located by political boundaries instead of need
- No standardization of services
- MCFD does not recognize that volunteers are trained and qualified
- City council and fire boards do not want to resolve tax issues
- Need increased manning on MRFD engines
- Too much fighting between agencies; too many boundary disputes
- Volunteers are responding within city limits, which may be illegal
- Need a more acceptable and cooperative mutual aid agreement
- Hooking up to sewer system should not be linked with emergency services
- Ignoring other recommendations (1986 Master Plan) by politicians
- Too many service providers in one area, unclear boundaries
- Missoula County is one of three counties in Montana not in the State/County Cooperative Fire Protection Program
- Turf problems need to be resolved
- City/County governments should consolidate
- City limits should expand in order to extend professional services
- Volunteers can not provide the same level of services as professionals
- Densely populated areas should be within city limits in order to receive full fire services

NO BORDERS:

The following questions are based on this scenario:

There are no political boundaries in the Missoula Valley. You have been selected to design a fire services delivery system.

1. What boundaries would you assign and why?

- Missoula County boundary (11)
- Boundaries based on population base and adequate tax base (6)
- Extend city service to Frenchtown, Lolo, and Milltown, East Bonner/Clinton (5)
- Same as present (3)
(boundaries, con't)
- City limits for MCFD (2), mountain ridges for MRFD
- Missoula valley, excluding Frenchtown, Lolo, and Milltown
- Allow residents to decide what they want and will pay for (2)
- Closest station response
- Frenchtown, Lolo, Florence FD should move boundaries in, MCFD cover remaining MRFD area (2)
- Whatever provides the fastest response time
- Cooperative agreement works well
- Give industrial and commercial areas special consideration
- Contract services to high risk areas outside city limits
- Geographical boundaries which allow for effective delivery of services
- Valley system with residents willing to pay for services, tax base diminishes as population declines; services provided by volunteers in sparsely populated areas
- Develop comprehensive information base re: demographic patterns, distribution of values-at-risk, historical fire information, projected growth, and projected available tax base
- One service area for greater Missoula, one for rural area
- Incorporation of volunteers into city fire department
- Anywhere that city sewer and road services are provided
- Divide valley into response areas where certain emergency vehicles would respond to those areas
- Combine areas covered by MCFD, MRFD, and East Missoula FD
- One service area for Missoula urban area
- Three tiered system including government, state, and federal lands; metro urban area covered by paid full-time three person engine companies, urban area covered by two person companies; rural area covered by volunteers: Each area based on tax base
- Create a Missoula urban valley fire department

2. What advantages do you see based on your design?

- Reduced cost (16)
- Better coverage and response times (7)
- Better level of service (6)
- More Consistent services and training (5)
- Less duplication (3)
- Reduction of political friction, "no empire building" (3)
- Tax sharing (3)
- Better management with a combined department (2)
- Combined training for better joint operations (2)
- Better resources near high risk areas (2)
- More resources (2)
- Better trained personnel
(advantages, con’t)
- People willing to pay for services will receive them
- Makes geographical, political, demographic, and economic sense
- Uniformity of service
- Better quality control
- Addition of more volunteers would ensure quicker response
- Better use of manpower
- Better fire protection
- Simpler boundaries
- Based on needs, not inter-jurisdictional politics
- Less administrative jobs, more firefighter jobs
- Creation of a career firefighter intensive urban quick response dept.
- Mutual aid offers closer response

3. What disadvantages do you see based on your design?

- Difficult to put aside political differences (4)
- Higher taxes for annexed areas (3)
- Increased cost (3)
- Public ignorance re: level and services received (2)
- Fire services would have to respond greater distances (2)
- MRFD would cease to exist, causing loss of jobs (2)
- Reduction of service in the urban area (2)
- Difficulty in overcoming turf battles (2)
- City may not be able to annex all areas; contracting may suffice
- City/County politics
- Too big a change for people to accept
- Takes a lot of planning and commitment
- Loss of local control must be dealt with
- Loss of jobs
- Budgets would have to be combined
- Rural area still needs protection; possible restructuring would resolve
- Loss of identity for rural volunteers
- Management difficulties
- Smaller departments may feel they have no input
- Differences in retirement packages
- Wage disparities, seniority
- City Council feeling they are losing their power base
- Use of volunteers may lower ISO rating in city, but raise county rating
- Would take a long time to combine agencies
- Laws need to be changed
- Politics of developing a new concept
- Need continual revision to keep up with growth
- If governed by a separate agency, funding and continuity may be lacking
4. What services would you provide and why?

- Emergency Medical Services (38)
- Fire Suppression (37)
- Haz-Mat (28)
- Prevention (23)
- Public Education (22)
- Inspection (22)
- Arson Investigation (17)
- Wildland Fire Suppression (4)
- Public Assistance (2)
- Add ambulance service (3)
- Rescue (2)
- Airport crash fire rigs as backup
- Environmental services, air and water protection
- Three person companies, paid 24 hours
- Disaster planning and mitigation

5. What are the key factors in determining the fire service boundaries?

- Available financial base, property values (11)
- Population density (10)
- Geography (6)
- Reduce Response times, nearest station (5)
- Capabilities of nearest station (4)
- Identified risk and hazard, based on facts (3)
- Taxpayer request (2)
- There should be no boundaries (2)
- County Lines (2)
- Cost of service (2)
- Efficient use of resources (2)
- Business districts
- Demographics
- Standards set by fire history
- Current MRFD boundaries, add adjacent districts over time
- Political boundaries
- Major rivers and highways in the valley
- Career firefighter urban intensive service on valley floor
- Water system
- Ability to deliver adequate service
- Follow EPA requirements for planning and delivery in valley
- Expertise to handle situation at hand
ASSESSMENT:

1. Is there a need for change in fire service delivery in the Missoula valley?
   - 11% No
   - 88% Yes

2. Will there be a need for change during the next 10-20 years?
   - 2% No
   - 6% ?
   - 90% No

3. Do you feel that two person engine companies would be less effective than three person engine companies?
   - 4% No
   - 95% Yes

4. What do you see as the biggest challenge in meeting the fire service needs of Missoula's residents over the next 20 years?

   - Funding (13)
   - Dealing with growth (5)
   - Gaining cooperation between services (5)
   - Being able to put politics aside (5)
   - Consolidation (3)
   - Maintaining manpower, equipment, laws (2)
   - Controlling costs (2)
   - Changing current attitudes (2)
   - Taking time to make a consolidation effort work out
   - Providing a reasonable response time with limited resources
   - Adequate education
   - Providing cost-effective services
   - Meeting changing needs of an urban area
   - Alleviating decisions made based on politics
   - Restructuring city boundaries
   - Lack of ability to expand under current system
   - Inability to provide quick service
   - Rural and City Fire must be honest in assessing their capabilities
   - Providing adequate staffing for engine companies
   - Maintaining current level of service (city)
   - Providing the best service for the buck
   - The downsizing of MRFD
   - Personnel issues
CURRENT CONCERNS:
1. What are the barriers to changing the current fire delivery system in the Missoula valley?

   56% attitudes of politicians
   60% political boundaries
   58% fear of change
   58% animosity between fire dept.
   35% differences in retirement pkg.
   46% fear of the unknown
   51% fear of job loss
   11% other: paid staff vs. volunteers; city fear of subsidization; manning differences; difference in work hours; turf battles; fear of lower service levels

   44% attitudes of fire administration
   51% attitudes of fire service empl.
   49% fiscal concerns
   25% differences in wages
   42% difference in operating proc.
   28% differences in admin. philosophy
   19% no need for change

POSITIVE ASPECTS:
1. Of the following list, what do you feel might prove advantageous in a redesigning of fire services in the Missoula valley?

   59% reduction in duplication of services
   59% standardization of services
   60% better utilization of resources
   42% coordination of fire code enforcement
   16% increased political power
   35% increased purchasing power
   9% other: Depends on how change is made; reduce annexation conflict; increase coordination with wildland; citizens perceive that fire

   35% reduction in cost
   63% standardization of training
   42% improved training facilities
   21% reduction in apparatus costs
   47% unified work force
   63% increased level of service

   57
SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS:
MALE: 33  FEMALE: 6  ANONYMOUS: 4  43 TOTAL (100 SENT)

AVERAGE YEARS IN MISSOULA COUNTY: 26

CITY FIRE PERSONNEL: 10*
RURAL FIRE PERSONNEL: 17*
CITY COUNCIL MEMBERS: 3
RURAL FIRE BOARD MEMBERS: 1
OTHER: BUSINESS, UM, AIRPORT, OTHER FIRE SHERIFF, POLICE, ANONYMOUS 12

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HONESTY AND HELP!

** Surveys were sent out to 25 MCFD and 25 MRFD members

Developed and tabulated by Bill Silverman
APPENDIX B

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONNAIRE FOR OUT OF STATE CONSOLIDATED AGENCIES

5 OUT OF A POSSIBLE 12 RESPONSES

1. How many fire service agencies were consolidated in your area?
   - 2, 5, 10, in progress currently (two replies came from one agency and will be counted as one)

2. What were the names of the departments and when did the consolidation occur?
   A. King County Fire District 10, 35, 27, and City of Carnation, Washington (2)
   B. City of Spokane and Fire District 9, Washington
   C. King County Fire District 2, 11, 26, 39, and Sea Tac Fire Department, Wa.
   D. Tualatin FD-Washington Co. FD No.1; Washington Co. FD No.2- Hillsboro FD;
      Happy Valley FD- Clackamas Co. No.1, Clackamas Co. No.51; Milwaukie FD-
      Portland Fire Marshall Office, Oregon

3. How long did the consolidation effort take from conception to finish?
   A. Nine months
   B. Two and a half years so far
   C. Four months to date, expect four more months
   D. Two and a half years (fifteen for all mergers)

4. Since consolidation, what have been the positive impacts on fire services?
   - Lower costs and reduced taxes
   - Reduced manpower
   - Full commitment to programs, redirected staffing
   - Improved training
   - Immediate upgrade of breathing apparatus
   - Increase at one station to two firefighters 12 hours a day, seven days a week
     (three hired from volunteer roster)
   - Levy rate reduced from $1.50 per one thousand dollars of assessed value to $1.25
     per one thousand dollars
   - Insurance classification rate dropped from class eight to class five
   - Within a year, a 1986 1500 GPM pumper replaced a 1969 1250 GPM pumper and
     a new aid car was placed in the main station
   - All protective clothing was upgraded to PBI within two years
   - In 1991, we went to 24 hour manning with three firefighters on duty at all times
   - New station opened in 1992 to replace the old headquarters

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(positive impacts, con't)
- To date, all three pumpers and two of three aid cars have been upgraded
- Standardization of apparatus, equipment, and operations
- Greater regional voice in fire service issues
- More cost efficient
- Improved response times in merged areas
- Lower tax rate
- Can't answer yet

5. Since Consolidation, what have been the negative impacts on fire services?
- Can't think of a one
- Fewer promotions over the first 2-3 years
- Each department had different methods of operation
- "Yours and mine" "I know what's best" rather than creating a better system
- Ownership of programs

6. If you had a chance to go through the consolidation process again, what aspects would you change in order to bring about a smoother transition?
- Don't have so much trust in each department's chief
- No politics
- No Chiefs

7. Prior to the actual beginning of consolidation, what were the greatest barriers in the process?
- What colors will the trucks be?
- Can we still have booze in the station
- What will the volunteer structure be like?
- Who's operating procedures will be used?
- How are volunteer officers selected?
- Will career firefighters be regarded as superior to volunteers?
- What night will drills occur?
- Volunteers were not kept informed of the process within the program and felt it was a done deal when they were confronted
- Lack of communications with personnel
- Political barriers, local control issues
- Who wears the Chief hat?
- People who cannot work in a large department
- Egos
- Annexations
- Labor concerns
- Paid and volunteer integration
(greatest barriers, con’t)
- Fear of change
- Fear of loss of control
- Fear of identity loss

8. What recommendations would you offer in assisting other fire services who may be consolidating services?

- Give lots of lead time
- Be flexible and creative
- Involve labor and policy makers early in the process
- Get past the little issues
- Be open-minded; look beyond the way it’s always been done
- Recognize that you probably are not going to save large amounts of money
- Do your homework and discuss the smallest details
- Do tons of public relations and educational activities prior to voting
- Build a NEW system; do not use parts of old departments
- Change agency name immediately
- Issue new shoulder patches immediately
- Talk only about the new agency
- Mix everyone by transfers to new stations
- Create a NEW history and traditions for the department
- Involve all political, business, and community groups ASAP
- Utilize outside expertise that is objective and unbiased
- Be honest with each other
- Communicate everything to everyone as you proceed
- Involve department personnel in task groups throughout the process
- Inventory every function of the departments involved and use the best of each
- Keep the public informed as you proceed
- Involve elected officials in every detail of benefits and costs involved
- Don’t make promises you can’t keep
- Set out a time schedule and attempt to stick to it, but don’t become frustrated if you don’t
- Respect the feelings and opinions of others
- Assign one person to deal with the media; always refer questions to that person
- Give people three choices once the ball starts rolling:
  1. Become involved and support the process
  2. Fight the process and then yield when they see they are losing
  3. If they don’t like the results, quit

9. What is the greatest disadvantage to consolidation of fire services?

- Perceived loss of control by elected officials
- Fire apparatus color may be different
(disadvantages, con't)
- Difficulties with differences in levels of services and taxes
- Stay small and die
- If not done correctly, someone could lose
- Narrow-mindedness, tradition

10. What is the greatest advantage of fire services consolidation?

- Common sense; it usually gets help to the public quicker
- Efficiencies of management (minimizes duplication)
- Efficiency
- Becoming a living, viable agency looking forward to a new department
- Reduced overhead costs, ie: management, apparatus, etc.
- Improved training
- Improvement of service to the public
- Personnel packages usually improve
- Reduce cost and duplication
- Better purchasing power for equipment and supplies
- Greater bond authority
- Larger organization attracts better quality personnel
- Provides the opportunity to expand programs and start new ones
- Better data collection from larger organization

11. Who were the lead agencies, organizations, or persons involved in the consolidation process?

- Combined effort of three fire chiefs and three boards of commissioners
- King County FPD #39
- Politicians and fire chiefs
- Two chiefs
- Fire chiefs, labor, policy makers, legal, management team
SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

SURVEYS SENT 12
SURVEYS RETURNED 5
SURVEYS RETURNED BY POST OFFICE 3
STATE RESPONDENTS FROM WASHINGTON (4) OREGON (1)
AVERAGE TIME TO CONSOLIDATE 26.5 MONTHS

** DEVELOPED AND TABULATED BY BILL SILVERMAN
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE
(Mayors / Councils / Fire Board)

IMPLEMENTATION COMMITTEE
(Administrators and/or Finance Director)

Major Non-Operational Issues of Consideration:
- Structure
- Funding Mechanisms
- Taxpayer Impact
- Jurisdictional Impact
- Public Relations
- Transition
- Indebtedness

TECHNICAL STUDY COMMITTEE
(Fire Officers)

Major Operational Issues of Consolidated Department:
- Administration
- Operations
- Training
- Maintenance
- Fixed Assets
- Support Services
- Communications
- Fire Prevention
Steps to Take

1. Fire Agencies Meet & Discuss
   Future Consolidation
2. Local Government Officials Meet & Approve Study Committee
3. Appoint Task Force (Fire Chief)
   Assign Study Teams
4. Meet To Review Task Force Recommendations
5. Decision To Abort or Proceed
6. Adopt Method And Timetable Of Event
7. Official Decision
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Reed, Wilbur. Interview by Bill Silverman, Missoula, Montana, 17 August 1993.


