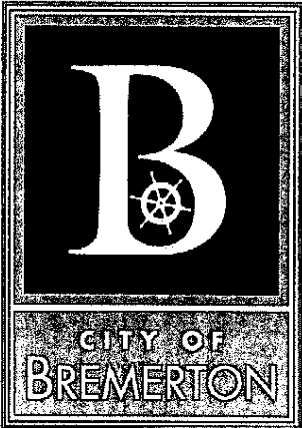


Fire Department Consolidation
Committee Report and Recommendation
February 2010



Fire Department Consolidation Committee **Report and Recommendation**

I. INTRODUCTION

The City of Bremerton has been engaged in discussion for many years regarding the idea of consolidating its fire department with another local fire jurisdiction. Efforts have ranged from informal discussions between elected officials to the formal process of establishing a regional fire authority. To this point, however, all efforts, while not in vain, have proven to be unsuccessful.

The largest effort at consolidation began in 2006. That year, the Bremerton Fire Department, in cooperation with Central Kitsap Fire and Rescue (CKFR) and South Kitsap Fire and Rescue (SKFR) began participating in a Cooperative Services Feasibility Study.¹ The report, issued in June 2007, concluded that the consolidation of all three departments was not only possible, but should be considered as the preferable means of doing business. The in-depth analysis provided the jump off point by which all three agencies agreed to initiate a regional fire authority and begin the process of legal consolidation. In October of 2007, the West Sound Fire and Rescue planning committee began holding formal meetings. The goal was the eventual regionalization of fire protection services for the citizens of South and Central Kitsap as well as the citizens of the City of Bremerton.

Due to several unforeseen issues, however, the task of consolidating all three jurisdictions into one fire department proved to be too large. In September of 2009 the West Sound Fire and Rescue planning committee determined that continued efforts at consolidating all three departments at the same time were not practicable. Consequently, the legislative bodies of all three jurisdictions withdrew from the planning committee.²

However, all three jurisdictions recognized the importance of continued efforts to look for ways to provide better service to their citizens, yet be more efficient with the use of their tax payers' money. Toward this end, it was determined that a phased approach to consolidation might make the most sense. With only two jurisdictions initially working towards consolidation, the effort, it was thought, might be less complicated and provide a better chance at success. Because of Bremerton's location between CKFR and SKFR, it was determined that Bremerton's participation was critical to a successful consolidation. Accordingly, it was recommended that Bremerton select one of the two agencies to continue working towards consolidation. However, the ultimate goal would be to have the three agencies consolidated sometime in the future.

¹ This lengthy report, prepared by ESCi can be found on the City of Bremerton's Fire Department's web site.

² It should be noted that the ESCi study specifically mentioned that efforts this large some times take many years of work.

II. THE PROCESS

In November of 2009, the City of Bremerton began the process of determining how best to continue working towards consolidation. A committee, comprised of City Council members Adam Brockus, Cecil McConnell, and Brad Gering as well as Fire Chief Al Duke, Rob Ashmore, IAFF Local #437 and Ken Bagwell, Assistant City Attorney, was tasked with returning a recommendation to the Bremerton City Council regarding whether the City of Bremerton should work towards consolidation with SKFR or CKFR.

This committee immediately began this task and asked that both CKFR and SKFR provide proposals to the City of Bremerton for a consolidation of the fire departments³. The departments were asked to provide information regarding the following:

1. Their preferred option of bringing the two entities together as well as a projected timeline.
2. An identification of the possible stakeholder groups.
3. Whether the department believed that an outside facilitator would be necessary.
4. An explanation of the financial model being proposed.
5. The needs and opportunities the department would be able to address through consolidation.
6. An identification of the specific efficiencies that would be met and the positive impact they would have for the citizens.
7. A description of the departmental/cultural similarities and differences between the Bremerton Fire Department and their department.
8. A description of the proposed organizational model from years 1 – 5.
9. Information regarding the current labor/management relationship in their department as well as an outline of the proposed labor/management arrangement.
10. Whether a formal dispute resolution process would be part of any plan to consolidate.
11. How to consider further expansion.
12. An explanation of the communication plan.
13. Any other considerations that the department thought important.

On December 15, 2009, CKFR provided their proposal to the committee. A meeting between several of the CKFR stakeholders and the committee was held to allow CKFR to explain their proposal and answer any questions from the committee⁴.

³ Copies of the two proposals have been attached to this document.

⁴Of significance in the CKFR proposal was the role the Chief Duke would play under the CKFR proposal. The committee was informed that the CKFR Fire Chief was retiring and that CKFR would like Chief Duke to act as Chief for both departments during the process of consolidation. CKFR believed that this would have a significant impact on the process, allowing Chief Duke to work with both departments towards consolidation as well as provide an immediate efficiency.

This proposal, however, had an unforeseen consequence. To avoid the appearance of any conflict, Chief Duke had to remove himself from the decision making process of the committee. While he made himself available to provide information, Chief Duke never offered his opinion regarding the best option for the City of Bremerton

Fire Department Consolidation Committee Report

Two days after CKFR provided their proposal, the committee met with SKFR and was provided with the SKFR proposal. The same process was followed. A meeting was held and committee members were allowed to ask questions of SKFR's representatives.

After receiving the two proposals, the committee held three meetings over the course of December and January. In addition to the three committee meetings, there were several other meetings by other members of the committee. Ken Bagwell and Rob Ashmore met two times and Chief Duke and Ken Bagwell held a meeting with the IAFF Local #437. There were also two additional meetings, one with the SKFR Chief, Wayne Senter and another with CKFR's Chief, Ken Burdette. All meetings were productive and helped to guide the committee in its decision.

III. COMMITTEE CONSIDERATIONS

The committee quickly determined that without the input from a participating jurisdiction, it was going to be very difficult to provide answers to some, if not all, of the considerable issues that the City of Bremerton would need to address to benefit from a successful consolidation⁵. For example, to arrive at the answers provided in the ESCi report referenced earlier took months of work by all three jurisdictions. Even the two year effort by the West Sound Fire and Rescue planning committee ended without the answers to several important issues.

The difficulty of answering many of the complex questions involved in a consolidation without the input from another agency changed the committee's focus. The committee's direction turned towards identifying which department provided the City of Bremerton with the best opportunity for answering those questions and eventually, a successful consolidation.

To do this, the committee attempted to identify a number of best predictors for success. Initially, the committee identified five areas of focus. They were:

1. Finances
2. Operational/Organizational Compatibility
3. Cultural Similarities
4. Labor Agreement/Negotiation Similarities
5. Governance

By comparing each jurisdictions proposal as well as considering some outside factors the committee believed that it would be able to arrive at an answer that would provide helpful direction to the City Council. The best predictors for success would act as a guide in the committee's deliberations.

Even determining answers to the best predictors for success proved difficult, however. For example, determining a financial model that provides the City of Bremerton and its citizens the

⁵ The committee identified several issues that would need to be addressed with the input of the participating jurisdiction. First, the financial model required to complete a successful consolidation would take considerable effort by both jurisdiction, working to identify efficiencies, etc. Finances, of course, are dependant upon the organizations structure as well as its operational plan. These can not be determined without the participation of the other jurisdiction.

Fire Department Consolidation Committee Report

same or better fire service for no additional cost to the tax payers is nearly impossible without further in-depth discussions with another department.

There were some answers, however, that were able to be determined. For instance, regarding operation/organizational compatibility, the committee was able to determine that there are shift similarities between SKFR and the Bremerton Fire Department. There is also a long history of the Bremerton Fire Department successfully working with SKFR to meet operational needs. While the brand of equipment that we use might be different, SKFR and Bremerton both have ladder trucks, providing assurance that the City would always have access to a ladder truck.

The committee also quickly determined that the best model of governance for a future consolidated fire department was a regional fire authority. The regional fire authority model provides better representation for the citizens of the City of Bremerton by immediately allowing members of the City Council to participate on the planning committee. The regional fire authority process also provides flexibility to handle the unforeseen issues that often arise in a consolidation. The regional fire authority model allows the planning committee to address these issues in a work plan that is eventually voted on by the public. The opportunity to customize a work plan that meets the needs of the particular departments involved offers a tremendous benefit to the departments and the citizens they serve.

The committee's preference for the regional fire authority governance model was communicated to both CKFR and SKFR. Both jurisdictions indicated that they were willing to agree to work under the regional fire authority model.

When it came time to determine the cultural similarities between the agencies, the committee determined that the people best suited to make that determination were the firefighters themselves. As was mentioned earlier, Chief Duke and Ken Bagwell met with the union to discuss the work of the committee. It was explained to the union that the committee's work was to do nothing more than advise the City Council on which agency the City should continue to work with to determine whether a consolidation was feasible. However, to fully determine whether a consolidation was possible would take union support. Accordingly, the union was asked to vote on two issues. First, whether they thought the City of Bremerton should even consider consolidation and second, if the City chose to continue working towards consolidation, which department would the union prefer to work with.

The results of the vote revealed to the committee two points. The union split in its decision, 27 votes to 27 votes, on whether the City should continue down the path of consolidation. This vote clearly established for the committee that there is further opportunity to answer some of the union's questions regarding consolidation. However, the union overwhelmingly voted (40 votes to 10 votes) that their preference was to work with SKFR, should the City choose to continue working towards consolidation. This decision by the union shows a comfort level with SKFR. Whether that comfort level is a result of cultural similarities or just a reflection of time spent together, the union's preference should carry considerable weight. Eventually, any new organization will be required to negotiate a new contract with its firefighters. Unless the firefighters feel that their voice has been heard and their questions answered, it is unlikely that any consolidation will be successful.

Fire Department Consolidation Committee Report

This preference also plays an important role in the determination regarding labor agreement similarities. The committee found that none of the agreements currently in effect are particularly alike. However, the unions from SKFR have expressed their desire towards working with the Bremerton Fire Department's firefighters as well as a desire to see a successful consolidation. These facts indicate that there is an opportunity for successful negotiations with the SKFR and Bremerton unions.

IV. CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATION

One fact became abundantly clear to the committee. To fully know whether a consolidation of the Bremerton Fire Department with another jurisdiction is feasible requires an in-depth analysis by the two agencies investigating the possibility of consolidation.

Accordingly, the committee first recommends that the City of Bremerton administration initiate a 6 month analysis to determine the feasibility of re-establishing a regional fire authority. This time period should be used to fully answer any outstanding questions regarding a regional fire authority. Much of the work done previously for the West Sound Fire and Rescue planning committee will be beneficial to this analysis. However, there is a need to definitively answer some outstanding issues. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Does a consolidation make financial sense for the City of Bremerton and its citizens as well as the citizens of any new fire district?
2. What would the new organization look like from a personnel perspective?
3. How would the new organization operate?
4. Would the citizens realize better service?

Again, these questions and others can only be answered with the cooperation of the jurisdiction with whom the Bremerton Fire Department would potentially consolidate. After the 6 month review, the City would then have enough information to know whether or not the City should re-establish the regional fire authority. If the answers to the necessary questions have been provided, the ground work will have been laid for the work plan of a new regional fire authority. The City will then be able to move quickly towards asking the voters to approve a new fire district.

The question remains then, who should the City of Bremerton work with during this 6 month period of time? The committee believes that both CKFR and SKFR are extremely well run fire districts. They both offer benefits and challenges to the City of Bremerton in a consolidation process. However, the committee believes that SKFR offers the City of Bremerton the best possibility for working together towards a successful consolidation.

SKFR and the City of Bremerton have a long history of working together to provide fire protection services to their respective citizens. SKFR also has shown through outreach of its unions as well as its command staff that they are willing to work with the City as a partner to answer all the necessary questions surrounding a consolidation. These facts, and others, when looked at in light of the Bremerton Fire Department's union's overwhelming choice to work with SKFR, provided support for the committee's decision.

Fire Department Consolidation Committee Report

Accordingly, the committee recommends that the City should immediately begin the 6 month process of analysis with SKFR to determine the potential success of a regional fire authority. If at the end of 6 months it appears that the City should re-establish the regional fire authority with SKFR, a resolution will be brought to City Council for approval of the establishment of a new regional fire authority planning committee. The planning committee would then adopt a work plan which would then be returned to the City Council for approval. The question of the new regional fire authority would then be submitted to the voters.

There is still a great deal of work to be done before the City will know whether a consolidation of its Fire Department with SKFR is practicable. However, it is an important issue that needs to be addressed and the City administration, including Mayor Lent and Chief Duke support the continued process.

