

We recently sent an article out to you talking about the inevitability of consolidation. That article spoke about the State of Wisconsin. This letter is to discuss the potential of our local fire departments merging to meet the growing needs of our communities.

The committee that has been meeting to discuss the financial viability of a merged district between the Village of Eagle, Town of Eagle, and the Village of North Prairie has agreed to present to the municipal boards the following information;

The financial contribution from the municipalities will be divided by Equalized Value as calculated annually by the State of Wisconsin. There was much discussion on the viability of looking at different formulas. These formulas were presented in budget format and discussed at length. It was decided that Equalized Value was the least volatile formula to divide the municipal share of the budget. Most formulas use calls for service which can sway the budget to one municipality or the other by thousands of dollars per year. Equalized Value, while it does fluctuate annually, is primarily consistent from year to year.

North Prairie has agreed to match the reserve funds that have been placed in savings by the Eagle Fire District which will help to balance the first three years of the joint budget. Eagle has managed to put into reserves approximately \$300,000.00. The three year annual payment from North Prairie will be \$50,000.00 per year or \$150,000.00 over three years. This payment will be brought in to the district as revenue, therefore reducing the municipal share of the district budget.

The Intermunicipal Agreement will have a ten (10) year term and a two (2) year back out term. It will take the first two years to get a history of the district to be able to analyze the accuracy of the projections and to qualify the incentives of the merger. A two year back out gives any of the three municipalities an opportunity, with a two year notice, to back out of the agreement. The severability of the District will still need to be determined and investigated by the ad hoc and an attorney.

The Fire Board is the governing body of the district that oversees the operation of the fire district. The Fire Board will consist of seven members; Three from the Town of Eagle, Two from the Village of Eagle, and Two from the Village of North Prairie. The President or Chairperson from each municipality will be a member and the remaining board members will be represented by municipality citizens. The term of board members shall be two years.

The Fire Commission shall have the duties as set forth by 62.13 Wis. Stats excluding the optional powers as set forth 62.13 Wis. Stats. The commission shall be responsible for the hiring and termination of employees as well as grievance procedures as defined in the Intermunicipal agreement, yet to be written. The make-up of the commission shall be three people, one from each municipality.

The question then is, why? What is in it for my municipality? What advantage does this have for the constituents that I have been elected to represent? The answer to that question may surprise you. The answer is more than financial advantage. Like the previous article that was sent out stated, governing officials will focus on money and Fire Chiefs (departments as a whole) will focus on service. It is this statement that produces the need to define the incentives and advantages of a merger.

In the United States there are 1 million firefighters and EMS professionals. 75% of which are paid on call or volunteers in the fire service. The number of volunteers and the number of people coming to paid on call departments are waning. This is a pandemic issue across the entire nation and our departments are in similar despair. Eagle has a membership of nearly 30 employees, two-thirds of which are EMT only. North Prairie has a similar roster but is completely the opposite with two-thirds being firefighter only. Both departments actively recruit new people but people do not come in, in droves. Unfortunately, like the national average, the attrition rate is higher than the rate of new hires. Our departments are faced with doing more as our communities grow, with less people. The fire departments are not alone in this situation. If we look at the other community based organizations such as the Lions Club, the Lioness, the PTO, etc., we see decreasing numbers in those organizations as well. The reasoning is a different subject, but it has affected all organizations including the fire departments. The merger of the two departments will not fix the numbers of volunteers or paid on call personnel nationwide, but it can and will improve the service to our communities by simply increasing our personnel resources available for the day to day operations.

Personnel staffing is an ongoing issue, even with the number of people on both departments especially during the day. A merger would allow us to share personnel between stations during the day to ensure adequate staffing for any emergency mitigation that would arise. It would also augment our night time staffing and possibly alleviate burn out from the same people running calls night after night.

The merger of departments will also improve response times to areas of the district. Part of the current Eagle District is minutes closer to the North Prairie station and can be serviced more efficiently by creating different response areas for each station. We can also maximize our response capabilities for major emergency scenes by putting plans together for automatically having apparatus and personnel dispatched simultaneously instead of needing to call dispatch for extra pieces of needed equipment.

Another advantage to merging departments comes in the preparedness category. By standardizing the setup of our fire apparatus and the stocking of our ambulance equipment and supplies, we can work together more effectively and train more proficiently, giving our communities better service overall. This would also create a unified training structure. Training

together will increase our productivity on emergency calls for service and will allow each station to know all of the equipment of both stations. It will also allow us the opportunity to have enough personnel for specialized training. We can offer specialized training in unique areas that can increase our preparedness for our district such as rail road emergency response, haz-mat, and possibly paramedic, as well as other specialties as defined by the district's executive staff.

One of the most significant advantages of merging departments is the unity it brings between two departments that are very similar in make-up; unity of staffing, training, covering the district as a whole, and the governance of the district.

One aspect of a merger is resolving staffing and response issues as previously stated. The other aspect is finances. Financial stability is a key component to making a merger successful. A detailed 10 year consolidated budget will be emailed out shortly after this document is sent out. The proposed budget that you will see is an operational budget only and does not include capital expenses such as apparatus purchases and building repair. The operational budget will show slight savings for most, however, the advantage comes in the long range planning of capital expenses.

A merger will allow us to evaluate the need for apparatus from a district view. Do we need four fire engines in the district or can we eliminate one engine and save that money? Do we have a need for three ambulances? Is there equipment that can be eliminated or simply not purchased when it comes time to replace it? When it is decided that a major piece of equipment is needed to be replaced, each municipality will share the cost at Equalized Value, saving each municipality thousands of dollars. This is where the greatest cost savings will come from in a merged district versus two stand-alone departments.

Other financial cost savings, although not as dramatic as capital equipment, is the savings of bulk buying power. By standardizing our supplies, we will be able to reduce cost of service through buying larger quantities of supplies, and therefore reducing the prices. We will also be able to consolidate payroll services, accounting services, and secretarial duties through one office, and therefore be able to save payroll costs of the district secretary.

These are a list of the advantages of a merged district between the Eagle and North Prairie Fire Departments. Merging and consolidations have been ongoing for many years across the state and the nation as a way of the future. It has solidified districts to be sustainable and resolute for the next generations. If we remain stand-alone departments, we will be vulnerable. We are at risk of losing the ability to provide proper services to our communities in the future because of staffing and financial considerations. There are many incentives for a merger of departments; it is not simply a financial decision.

