

Improving the Efficiency of Fire Services in Seven Southwestern Cuyahoga County  
Communities

A Joint Project of Area Majors and Baldwin-Wallace College

All-Firefighters Meeting\*

October 17, 2006

Attending Meeting: Jim Astorino, Stephen Baker, Jason Bowman, John Braskie, Mire Byrne, Lonnie Chupa, Steve Clark, Sonny Covic, Dave Dacek, James Dunkle, Tom Emling, Eric Fingerhut, Bill French, John French, Kim Lammers, Steve Metlesitz, Jerald Miluk, Mike Mohnickey, Mary Pisnar-Sweeney, Tim Potts, Pete Poznako, Joe Schultz, Ken Shroko, Ed Sopko, Jon West, Chuck Widowski, and Martin Zanotti.

Eric Fingerhut gave a short introduction to all of the speakers which included Jim Astorino, Eric Fingerhut, Mary Pisnar, and Martin Zanotti. Mary Pisnar gave a short PowerPoint presentation with a general overview of the make-up of the Fire Services Regionalization Project (noting that the web-site's address is [www.bw.edu/~fire](http://www.bw.edu/~fire)). She then opened the question and answer period of the night.

Q: Is this project going to cause a tax increase or will it be funded with current resources?

A: We are hoping that it will cost the tax payer the same if not less. The finance team will be working with the legal team to develop a system of funding, but at this time we are not sure of how the finances will exactly work.

The project wants to make clear that the consolidation of fire departments does not in any way mean that there will be an elimination of jobs.

Q: Currently there are seven cities, with seven chiefs, etc. How are you going to keep from any social upheaval of the combining of all of the entities?

A: It will not be an easy process, but the Operations Team will create a phasing in plan. It won't be easy, but we'll have to slowly merge into it. People will have to be willing to do it.

Q: In the initial study Parma is listed at 12 square miles, when in reality it is much larger. Seeing that some of the numbers in the study are off; will there be another study analyzing the correct data?

A: We are now in the process of adding the two new cities and we will make sure to go back and correct any mistakes we have made. This is good because we want all of our information to be public so that it can be questioned. This will keep us in touch with what the public's concerns are.

We acknowledge that Parma is much larger than the rest of the cities and that it will take a lot of consideration for them to accept the model. This is why we are so grateful to Tim Dobeck, Parma Law Director, for giving us his cooperation and help on the Legal Team.

Q: One of your goals is to contain costs. If that happens, will there be a decrease in taxes?

A: You have to look at it this way. The community is aging, therefore fire and EMS services are going to have increasing expenses. No one here thinks that expenses are not going to increase; we only hope that we can stop them from having such a dramatic increase. We are trying to be forward thinking. We will eventually have to find a way to meet the growing needs.

There seems to be a sense of professionalism within the fire districts. It would be better that the professionals operate the fire district rather than politicians who are not as qualified in that area of expertise.

Q: With the current seven collective bargaining agreements some firefighters are making more than others. Are the people making the most going to have a pay cut or will all of the other firefighters be brought up to their pay scale?

A: We really do not know what will happen because the teams have not begun to look at it. The pay disparity is not as different as you may think. You can't just look at base pay because there are other factors that go into it. If we go with a fire district there will be an agreement, a constitution that will spell out how all of it will happen. Everything will be included even the unions and Civil Service.

Q: What standards are we going to be using for manning standards?

A: We will be striving for the UFBA 1710 standard. None of the current fire departments are currently meeting that standard. All of the departments have ladder trucks, but they do not always have enough man power to operate those trucks. This will be a subject that the Operations Team will work on.

Q: have other cities shown interest in joining and can they even join?

A: Yes, there is interest, but we capped it off at the seven so that the project could begin moving forward. Other cities may join or more likely they may follow our model and develop their own joint districts.

To go back we are hoping that all of this will improve training.

Q: You were talking of things being duplicated. What do you think we are duplicating?

A: A lot of things. We have fire stations across the street from each other; they are not geographically placed in the best interest of the citizens. Large trucks are huge expenses and we may not need as many as we have now. The departments are currently top-heavy and the chiefs know that.

Q: You described all that has happened, but what has been decided?

A: Nothing, which is why we have over a year time frame to create this model. Every city is different and there are a lot of complex aspects to this project. We wanted this meeting to show you where we are starting and we will have more meetings down the road to show you what we have accomplished. This meeting will allow us to show the committees your questions and concerns. It is important that we keep you up-to-date, so go on-line and read the minutes to keep updated. We are relying on you; we need your expertise. After a committee makes a decision it goes to the Strategy Team to overview.

Q: I was expecting a lot more numbers, where are they?

A: Go to the web-site, the study and all the numbers are there.

Q: What are the costs?

A: The study only demonstrated to us how much we don't know concerning finances. The Finance Team is developing what each city's current finances are for their fire and EMS services.

Q: What if this doesn't work? It seems you are working backwards.

A: We felt that the legal structure was our first step and from there we would develop more concurrently. Any of the factors could cause this project to fail; legal, finance, or operations. Hopefully, if it does not work we will be able to take some aspects from the project and be able to implement them.

The growth of EMS runs will be and are on the cities' shoulders. We need some kind of demand manager, because not all EMS runs are emergency runs and that costs.

Q: Lots of cities have automatic aid. Why are we taking such a big first step? Why don't we just start with that?

A: Our project is a massive undertaking and it may not work out in its entirety, but in the end we hope some good things come from it. Automatic aid and joint dispatch are naming a few.

Q: Why not take smaller steps?

A: Automatic aid cherry picks services from other cities. Often when there is mutual aid between two cities on city feels it is giving more aid than it is receiving. This project would allow for the same results, but it would be a fairer way to fund it. With the phasing in perspective, we may start with something like that and then slowly join in other ways as well.

Q: What are the cost savings if it is not in man power?

A: Generally other districts report that their man power increases after regionalization. It is important to look long-term here; what can each community handle down the road? Each department has things like ladder trucks; the district may not need seven ladder trucks. There are other things like service contracts that we will be able to bring down to one.

You can't look at a department and tell us you see it fully staffed. This may not be the most politically safe thing to do. If we don't do something our communities are going to choke to death, our communities can not keep up financially the way that they are now. We need to remove fire services from the cities' politics, the fire services need to be a self-governing entity.

Q: In areas that they have tried this and have failed what were the reasons for failure?

A: We are not aware of communities that looked into regionalizing and decided against it. No, there are places that have, but they chose against it only because of territorial reasons. They wanted to work for their city and not a district. Often these cities chose against it the first time, but when looking at it a second time they decided to regionalize.

If we do our jobs well, this will be easier to sell to the firefighters than it will be to the city councils.

Q: We have a lot of work to do if this will work. What are the benchmarks that we will use to justify the cost?

A: The main benchmark is response time, not just the first responders but the entire crew. Another benchmark will be training and better consistency over time. Specialties, placement of equipment, man power, and even ISO ratings can be used.

Q: What ISO rating do you have in mind?

A: I can't begin to guess. The cities we studied were with younger populations and had a 1 rating, but I can't imagine that we would ever get there. Hopefully we would be able to improve overall the communities.

Q: Has there been discussion on Civil Service?

A: Our initial contract "constitution" will identify civil service in it and will describe how a board is chosen.

Q: Will we still be civil servants and have the same protection?

A: Currently the Legal Team is leaning toward a fire district because of its taxing authority and other benefits. Time Dobeck has let us know that civil service can be added into the "constitution" contract.

The board that governs will be able to give the district a consistent voice. The Legal Team has just begun discussing what the board parameters would be. We can build into the contract what qualifications all members must have. Other districts have described these positions as prominent positions that people really want. The team did discuss limiting or even banning elected officials.

Q: You have described other regionalized fire districts. Where are these districts at?

A: The surveys from the Legal Team will be placed on the web-site.

-With our response time we count the time that the dispatcher uses while on the phone, but other cities may not count theirs this way. When you look at response times that may be something to look at.

-We used data from the Fire Marshall

Q: If you do tax how would you tax? Per capita?

A: It is too early to even say we would tax; the Finance Team is still looking into it. At the last finance meeting some finance directors envisioned that the district would be funded with the money that the cities currently take in for a period of time, but gradually

change to a levy or some other way. Over-all the money spent on all the budgets is between 27-30 million dollars, which would be a lot of money to generate including start-up costs.

Q: Do the councils have the power to authorize this? Or does it need to go to a referendum?

A: As far as we know they do, but they do have the option to sending it to a referendum. We are currently in the process of finding RFQs so that we may hire a legal consultant.

Q: Do we become employees of the district? What about assignments?

A: Yes, you would become employees of the district. There are two thoughts about the assignments, but neither have been discussed at the Operations meetings yet. One, everyone is scattered. Two, there be a slow transition period where the younger guys would float.

Q: How would the tax payers get their money back from the city if the district is financed through levies?

A: We know that this project will not work if we do not demonstrate how the money would be returned. It would defeat the purpose to have the tax payers paying higher taxes.

Q: If the district is formed how will the mayors have input?

A: It will be a hard sell to give up control. The may have some say on who is one the board.

Q: So there are politics involved?!

A: There are always politics, even in your fire departments, but to be clear there has been no decision made on how the board will be selected.

Q: What if a city just built a station will the city be reimbursed?

A: If the district is to assume all responsibility everything would be included, including debt.

Q: Currently on our pay checks a city tax is taken out. What tax would be taken out?

A: Great question, we will have to figure that out.

Q: Have you thought about combining mayors and cities?

A: No. Fire districts have been created before; they are already created in state law.

Q: But never seven cities our size?!

A: No, but we hope this will create a model for other cities to follow.

Thank you for coming. We will be giving regular updates on the web-site and with newsletters.

*\*All of the questions and answers have been paraphrased.*

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