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MEMO

TO: City Council
FROM: Public Safety Committee
RE: Fire Station Consolidation
DATE: March 20, 2012

Last summer it came to the attention of the Public Safety Committee that no City Council action had ever been taken on a question of Fire Station Consolidation which had been raised by a May 2009 Review of Fire Services report issued by MMA Consulting Group, Inc. of Brookline, Massachusetts as commissioned by the City of Burlington.

The Public Safety Committee conducted a series of hearings since last fall on the issue of Fire Station Consolidation. Ultimately, the CAO's Office and the Fire Department produced a joint report on the issue(s) [see attached]. That joint report concluded that:

It is the opinion of the authors that consolidation of the existing locations is not a solution that is best for the residents of Burlington. It is our shared opinion that we take a serious look at building a Super Station and consider options to maximize financial returns by closing Stations 1 and 5. An opportunity exists to build a Super Station without impacting call response times.

On March 20, 2012, the Public Safety Committee accepted the joint report and unanimously approved action to forward the report to the City Council with Public Safety Committee endorsement of the recommendations contained therein.



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What Are The Benefits to Consolidating Two Fire Station Locations?

By: Rich Goodwin
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Background

In 2009 the City hired the MMA Consulting Group, Inc. of Brookline Massachusetts to perform a comprehensive operational study of the Fire Department. The focus of the study was to be a station location recommendation, response time analysis and staffing effectiveness.

The study identified two areas of possible fire station consolidation. The first being the consolidation of Stations #1 and #3 within a newly constructed station possibly on or near the University of Vermont Campus and the second being the consolidation of Stations #1 and #5 within a newly constructed station in the Pine Street corridor.

Since the study's completion there have been several meetings between the University of Vermont (UVM) and the City of Burlington in regards to building a combined Public Safety facility that would house both a fire station and the UVM Police Department, along with the general identification of a potential building lot on Pine Street.

The City of Burlington's Public Safety Committee has been updated and has discussed the topic on several occasions, with the last meeting being held in August of 2011. The Committee requested further information on the following:

1. An analysis of the impact of consolidation of Stations 1 and 5 with a replacement station on Pine Street.
2. An analysis of the impact to Station 3 if the above two stations are closed.

In addition, the issues were clarified further by a request that the analysis include a breakdown of the potential changes, along with the impact to response times.

The purpose of this document is two-fold. First, it will explore the benefits/risks of consolidating the two fire stations. Second, to determine how much money both locations can save if the two fire locations were consolidated into one.

Evaluative research methods will be utilized to obtain fiscal information. The Office of the Clerk/Treasurer will provide financial data; the Business Manager of Police and Fire will provide data on station operation cost and the Fire Chief will provide expertise on the staffing, volume and response times and logistics.

The following questions have been addressed in this research:

- 1) What costs are associated with operating the Pine Street location?
- 2) How much money would be saved if Station 1 and Station 5 were consolidated?
- 3) What benefits, other than cost savings, would be gained by the taxpayers?
- 4) Are there any disadvantages to consolidating these two stations?

Introduction

The City of Burlington, Vermont presently has a full-time fire department. There are 79 full-time firefighters, 1 part-time administrative support position and, since 1999, a shared Fire/Police Business Administrator, in the merged Fire/Police Business Office located at the Police Department. Of the 79 members, 73 are assigned to shift, with the remaining 6 assigned to administration, training and fire prevention. The department has a minimum staffing of 20 firefighters on duty at all times. The Fire Department covers 15.5 square miles, and a population of about 43,000 (2010 census) residents. This number increases to over 60,000 when college is in session, with additional increases when downtown business employees and merchant / entertainment venues are included.

In the last 3 years there has been a large increase in call volume without an increase in the minimum staffing within the Burlington Fire Department. In 2011, the 5 fire station locations responded to 7007 calls for service, an increase of 5.5% from 2010 with an overall increase in call volume of 19% over the past 5 years.

The City of Burlington revenues have not kept pace with the cost of living allowances and step increases required by the union contracts. Inflation has caused challenges in balancing the budget. As a result, the City of Burlington is looking for areas to reduce expenditures. One potential area to save money is to consolidate Station 1, located at 136 South Winooski Avenue, and Station 5 located at 23 Ferguson Avenue. Choices have to be made in the savings gained and the services provided.

Significant Information

Recently, the City of Burlington has had to contend with a reduction in revenues. As a result, the City of Burlington has to make choices in the services they provide, either by cutting services or becoming more efficient in their delivery.

The City's Fire Department staffing has remained consistent, however, a continual increase in call volume has occurred over the past 8 years. Both locations, Fire Station 1 and Fire Station 5, are not able to expand their fire location's staffing to meet increased call volume due to budgetary constraints.

Both locations have seen a continual increase in call volume over the past 8 years. In 2004, Station 1 (Engine 1) responded to 2214 calls for service. In 2011, Engine 1 responded to 3201 calls for service. That is an increase of 44.5% or 987 calls over 8 years with no increase in minimum staffing.

In 2004, Station 5 responded to 653 calls for service. In 2011, Station 5 responded to 852 calls for service. That is an increase of 30.5% or 199 calls over 8 years with no increase in the minimum staffing.

Please find below a complete listing of fire stations below, 2011 call volume, and response times:

District #	Location	Total number of responses to calls for service	Average Department Response Time
1	136 S. Winooski Ave.	2,349 (Engine 1: 3201 calls)	3.33
2	132 North Ave.	1,296 (Engine 2: 2550)	"
3	20 Mansfield Ave.	1,677 (Engine 3: 2317)	"
4	1397 North Ave.	1,090 (Engine 4: 1201)	"
5	23 Ferguson Ave.	580 (Engine 5: 852)	"

Total Response to Calls in 2011: 7007

In the year 2011; of the 7007 calls the Department responded to, 2,351 of those calls were overlapping or simultaneous. Of the 580 calls in District 5, 450 or 78% of those calls overlapped with calls in District 1.

If we were to consolidate Station 1 and Station 5, based on 2011 call volume statistics, the Department would not be able to ensure optimal response times in either District.

In addition to the increasing call volume, all of the nation's fire departments have had to face other demands on their staff. New responsibilities such as hazardous materials, confined space and collapse rescue, above and below-grade rescue, and, most importantly, response to acts of terrorism and/or violence preparation and training. These changes, coupled with an increase in industry technology and enhancements to emergency medicine, result in increased mandated training requirement and the need to obtain, maintain and house a large amount of new equipment.

The forming and managing of citizen response teams and increased disaster planning are expected from fire departments. The Burlington Fire Department has met these new challenges with the same staffing levels, with both in-line and staff personnel. An example of this was the 2011 Lake Champlain Flooding and the efforts to protect public and private property.

There is potential with the 2013 Budget that additional reduction of firefighters will be needed. This will create even greater demands on a smaller staff.

- A slower response time will mean that fires will have the opportunity to burn longer, threaten life, cause more damage and emergency medical patients will wait longer for help.
- The slower response time will potentially increase insurance ratings for home owners.
- Closing Station 5 on Ferguson Ave has been discussed, based on a lower call volume and the location not being ideal. The current Utility and House Maintenance (everyday cleaning and supply) expenditures for Station 5 are \$14,190. However, it should be noted that much of this work is completed by the on-duty fire staff.

(Electric \$5,700, Water \$1,400, Gas \$5,890, Maintenance Supplies \$1200.)

- Apparatus maintenance costs for Engine 5 have averaged \$10,000 to \$12,000 per year. It is important to mention here that by reducing the number of apparatus, the maintenance costs for the remaining will increase. The need to replace apparatus will also be more frequent due to the impact of higher call volumes and longer responses. So, looking long term, the apparatus costs could in effect be higher overall.

The largest potential savings is not from the closing of a fire station, but reduction of staff. The staffing requirements are dictated by the recommendations of NFPA 1710 and the collective bargaining agreement. It is important to mention that the Department does not currently meet the recommended NFPA 1710 standards. The closing of Station 5 would require movement of the apparatus to Station 1 (or a newer combined station) or consideration of a reduction of apparatus. This would result in a major increase of call volume using existing apparatus at Station 1 and, more importantly, lengthen response time. Response times could be significantly longer due to overlapping incidents as well.

While consolidating or merging the fire locations may yield some savings, the response time will get longer within all districts and call volume will increase for remaining apparatus. The disadvantages associated with longer response times include:

- Increased potential for loss of life with trapped victims.
- Larger fire due to increased time for fire growth, which equates to greater property loss.
- Larger fire requires increased water supply, which requires more (not less) pumping apparatus.
- Longer response and/or larger incidents increase amount of workload or labor for crews on scene which raises potential for work related injury or death.
- Longer wait before emergency medical intervention equals decreased chance of survivability.

We agree that consolidation of the two fire locations is a concept that should be considered. However, there should be no reduction in fire staff or in administration, as the administrative staff consists of one person. In fact, the Fire Department has reduced administrative support by 3 in the past 15 years.

Instead of consolidation of Stations 1 and 5 with a reduction of an engine, we believe a better solution to consider is to strategically place a larger fire station covering both district 1 and 5, housing both units. This would not dramatically impact response time, and would provide an opportunity to close Stations 1 and 5. This would give the City two properties that could be repurposed or sold.

There have been an abundance of recent articles in local media, as well as in trade journals, about the benefits of merging fire departments or locations. The main focus of all the articles has been on saving money and increasing efficiency of the resources

delegated to the fire departments through merging two or more fire departments or locations (McClellan-Copeland, 2006; Sartin, 2006 and 2005; Ketchum, 2005; Gilbert, 2005; Stolz, 2004; Ott, 2005).

In 2004, Martin Stolz wrote an article, *One Big Fire Department?* in which he stated, mergers save money, which taxpayers can appreciate. When departments merge, they spend less to replace fire stations; which can be more strategically placed. Mergers often result in fewer administrators but not, generally, fewer firefighters. And they can result in a lot fewer equipment purchases, such as ladder trucks costing more than a half-million dollars each. (p. A8).

Not only are newspaper articles touting the benefits of consolidation, much talk about this topic has appeared in the fire service trade journals. A report from the Metro Macomb Fire District in March of 1994 cited a number of benefits in merging locations. They are:

- Upgrade of the professionalism of firefighters through uniform, high level, continued training programs,
- Centralized and coordinated administration and management of fire/emergency services. (This has already been done in Burlington)
- Pursue aggressive public education programs, preventing fire, medical, and other emergencies.
- Sell excess equipment, such as fire trucks, or a building.
- Potentially reduce insurance ratings in each community if strategically placed.

For all of the reasons above, we should consider the possibility of building a Consolidated Station (aka Super Station).

Conclusion

Article after article, either from the local newspapers or from the trade journals, have a common theme when it comes to merging fire locations, and that is that merging and consolidation can save money. However, we believe the City of Burlington will save little money by simply merging our existing stations, and **will not** increase the level of service to the public. However, the placement of a new Super Station which would consolidate personnel from two stations should be considered.

The response times with merged stations will be larger, and the impact of slower response times are:

- Increased potential for loss of life with trapped victims.
- Larger fire due to increased time for fire growth, which equates to higher property loss.
- Larger fire requires increased water supply, which requires more (not less) pumping apparatus.
- Longer response and/or larger incidents increase amount of work load or labor for crews on scene which raises potential for work related injury or death.

- Longer wait before emergency medical intervention equals decreased chance of survivability.

Procedure

To find out what potential benefits are available to consolidation, research should be done at the Burlington City Library, Planning and Zoning, the National Fire Academy, and the internet to see what has been successful when fire departments consolidate. Consideration should also be given to the MMA study that was conducted in 2009.

To find out what specific cost savings can be accomplished, more data should be gathered on the existing fire locations.

Finance Considerations

A couple of limitations were noted during this research project. First, we will need to identify a location to build a new station. Second, we will need to determine the costs of building the Super Station. We will need to develop a strategic plan on maximizing our return on the closing of Station 1 and Station 5 to offset the borrowing required to finance the Super Station.

Results

The results of the research are very interesting. By far, the largest expenditures of both locations are in the areas of personnel. It should be noted that payroll expenditures will not be eliminated through the consolidation of Station 1 and Station 5. The call volume will not drop and the apparatus must be staffed to respond to emergencies.

In the event a property tax increase does not pass, there could be layoffs from each department, including the fire department.

In our review, the increase in City of Burlington call volume may require more manpower, not less. Our biggest concern will be slower response times and increased risk to life, safety and property protection for the city by merging locations. We are concerned that by consolidating locations, we need to carefully consider the number of apparatus required to ensure the fire safety of our residences. We are concerned that the increase in calls and reduction in fire stations will result in a larger probability of having multiple calls at the same time.

The cost of apparatus is an area that may succeed in reducing costs for consolidation of the two locations, providing the apparatus level used is appropriate. When you reduce apparatus you must factor in the increased cost or accelerated costs associated with the remaining apparatus. The higher call volume compounded by higher use is a major driver of the useful life of fire trucks, apparatus, and a driver of higher expenses.

Research Questions

- 1) What costs are associated with operating a fire department?

From the data gathered from the Fire department, it is very obvious that the majority of the costs are in the area of personnel. In Burlington, 97% of the expenses for Station 1 and 94% of the expenses for Station 5 are for personnel wages and benefits. There could be some cost savings with group apparatus purchases. As for savings from reducing the personnel cost, this is very difficult with an increased call volume.

- 2) Are there any disadvantages in consolidating these two departments?

There are a couple of items worth noting. One of the most repeated disadvantages found in our research has been slower response times to fires, and the risk it carries by closing Station 5. This has the potential to increase home owners' insurance premiums.

Another problem noted during the research was that even with the merging of the two locations, there will still need to be minimum staffing as required by Union contracts, and the staff required when response times are slower requires more staffing, not less, as required by the National Fire Protection Agency.

Recommendations

It is the opinion of the authors that consolidation of the existing locations is not a solution that is best for the residents of Burlington. It is our shared opinion that we take a serious look at building a Super Station and consider options to maximize financial returns by closing Stations 1 and 5. An opportunity exists to build a Super Station without impacting call response times.

Level of service and response times

It is evident that consolidation is not a new idea in the Fire Service. It is a method that provides departments with an alternative way to address monetary restraints placed on us by the community and elected officials. However, as we learned from our research and interviews, money savings and budget restraints should not be the determining factor when considering consolidation. The level of service being provided must remain in focus at all times and how it affects the community has to be the overriding priority. We would recommend that we place our concern on the level of service provided to the community above savings.