

Consultant urges merger of North Kitsap, Poulsbo fire departments

By Josh Farley

Monday, August 29, 2011

KINGSTON — A consultant has recommended that the North Kitsap and Poulsbo fire departments merge to save money.

And that there's no time to waste, Don Bivins of Oregon-based Emergency Services Consulting Inc. told North Kitsap and Poulsbo's fire commissions Monday night.

"In our opinion, you need to do something now," said Bivins, a retired fire chief. "The longer you wait, the more you're relying on your reserve fund, which is already dwindling."

The two fire commissions paid the consulting firm \$49,000 to look at how the two entities could [find shared efficiencies](#) in a time of financial uncertainty.

The consultants' rather bleak prognosis involves at least [seven job cuts and elimination of one of the two chiefs positions](#) currently held by Dan Smith in North Kitsap and Dan Olson in Poulsbo.

That would generate about [\\$725,000 in cuts](#), the consultants said; a full merger would also [save about \\$500,000 a year by 2016](#), they added.

The two agencies cut the north end of Kitsap County in half, with Poulsbo serving Keyport to Port Gamble and North Kitsap serving Suquamish to Hansville.

Like all the state's fire districts, Poulsbo and North Kitsap each have two main sources of income: a fire levy, with which they can collect up to [\\$1.50 per thousand dollars](#) of assessed property value; and an EMS levy, with which they can collect [50 cents per thousand](#) of assessed value.

But property tax collections in Poulsbo's district have already hit a statutory cap on both levies as assessed values have fallen; in North Kitsap, they'll hit a cap on both in 2012, Bivins said.

Local fire districts asked Kitsap County Assessor Jim Avery earlier this year to predict how far assessed values will fall. He estimated at the time that they would fall 3

percent in 2011; Avery now believes values will decrease closer to 5 percent.

That means both fire boards will have to make sizable cuts in the coming years to stay afloat. The consultants told the boards in no uncertain terms that money need to be shed in order to survive.

"If you're getting the impression we are throwing luggage off the Titanic, that may not be an understatement," Bivins said.

The consultants praised the two departments, whose budgets both run about \$6 million apiece, as having "stellar" leadership and doing "an excellent job reaching out and connecting to community."

But they felt the best result for the two entities' futures was to become one "regional fire authority," similar to an effort tried but that failed in recent years between Central Kitsap Fire and Rescue, South Kitsap Fire and Rescue and the Bremerton Fire Department.

They acknowledged financial and "cultural" barriers between the agencies that would make that difficult.

The consultants also supported the idea of changing the districts' tax structure to include a so-called "[fire service benefit charge](#)," to increase revenue.

A benefit charge was floated as an idea for Central Kitsap Fire and Rescue in January 2010 but didn't go beyond a few public discussions. The charge, touted then as a way to tax citizens not by their property values but by the size of the structures on it, allows districts to increase their budgets by more than the state capped 1 percent a year.

The consultant estimates that the fire service benefit charge could mean an additional \$1 million a year to a combined North Kitsap district.

The two fire commissions agreed to work through the 358-page document produced by ESCI and then come to their own conclusions as to how best move forward.

Other recommendations from ESCI included:

- * Filling in a "doughnut hole" between the two agencies with a new fire station. While current revenues won't support the idea, the consultants pointed out that the districts had built stations in the heart of their districts to best fulfill the needs of their respective taxpayers, and response times would be lowered by a station in the middle.

- * Selling off reserve fire engines and ambulances, which cost money to maintain. The two districts "far exceed" the number they need, the consultant said.

- * Poulsbo Fire Department should look at copying NK's "very creative" intern and

resident program, which augments staffing.

* The consultants felt that Poulsbo Chief Dan Olson shoulders too much of the leadership burden and that's "not sustainable."

The consultants pointed out that their plan as recommended was painful and "might be a huge political hurdle." But, "so does insolvency," if no action is taken.

"I think doing nothing will not only court disaster but guarantee it," Bivins said.



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OPINION

No need for SKFR to hurry into a bad merger

May 8, 2009 4:13 pm

Tags: [South Kitsap](#)



As has been our inclination all along, we have no problem in theory with the idea of the South Kitsap Fire & Rescue District consolidating with Central Kitsap and Bremerton districts — so long as the move makes sense.

To be more specific, it has to make economic sense for the districts, and by extension, the taxpayers who pay their bills.

With that in mind, we were not at all discouraged to hear last week that the merger talks have been put on hold at least temporarily because, according to SKFR Commissioner Dusty Wiley, “...some of the (ideas) just weren’t penciling out.”

Wiley explained that the main stumbling block was figuring out how to merge three separate funding mechanisms into one policy that worked for residents of each distinct community.

“With the concerns about the economy and overall funding issues,” added SKFR Deputy Chief Steve Wright, “the committee passed a motion to not have the issue on the ballot this November.”

Fair enough.

In our mind, the goal of the merger was always to eliminate the overlap of services and enjoy economies of scale that would reduce operating costs. But if the result was going to be a larger, more difficult to manage mega-district that placed an unequal tax burden on one of the participating districts, we can be patient about getting started with it — especially since it seems that South Kitsap too often comes out on the short end of any partnership involving its neighbors to the north.

“This is not about saving money,” said SKFR Chief Wayne Senter. “This is about reallocating funds and resources to provide better services to our citizens more efficiently.”

That’s also fair.

It was a given that any consolidation couldn’t result in a reduction of services just to save money. At the same time, in this day and age, let’s not downplay the importance of saving a few bucks.

What we appreciate is that those doing the negotiating recognized ahead of time the deal wasn’t working and opted to back away from the game instead of playing out a bad hand.

If only it happened that way more often in the public sector.

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SK fire district commissioners back merger

▼ *If CKFR, BFD boards agree, the three agencies will officially discuss integration.*

By **JUSTINE FREDERIKSEN**

Staff Writer

Talk surrounding South Kitsap Fire and Rescue's potential integration with two other county fire agencies gained considerable steam on Thursday night as the district's board of commissioners officially approved moving the discussion to the next level.

"I think this is the thing to do," said Commissioner Darla Hartley, explaining that after attending a series of meetings during which SKFR leaders carefully reviewed a feasibility study outlining the potential for a "merger" between SKFR, Central Kitsap Fire and Rescue and the Bremerton Fire Department, it was clear to her how much the work of the three agencies overlapped. "I really feel we should give this a try."

Commissioners Dave Gelsleichter

and Dusty Wiley agreed, voting to approve along with Hartley.

"I think the next natural step is to go forward," Wiley said. "It will be a good move for us and the public to see what we can do with this."

Citing a potential conflict of interest since he is currently a captain with the Bremerton Fire Department, Commissioner Paul Golnik abstained

from the official vote, but still voiced his support for the process.

"I feel strongly that it's a good time to move forward and put together a plan," Golnik said.

"We have spent a lot of money and a lot of time on the

study, and let's move forward and see what we can do with it."

Senter, who along with his staff recommended moving forward to create an integration plan, clarified that Thursday's vote was not actually approving a merger of the agencies, but approving further discussions.



WAYNE SENTER

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MERGER

▼ *Fire district commissioners enthusiastic.*

CONTINUED FROM A1

“This will only mean continuing to the next step,” he said, explaining that that would entail sitting down with staff and stakeholders from the other two agencies and “seeing if we can develop a plan that would be

acceptable to you all.”

Such a process would only begin once the elected boards from the other two agencies also approve it, but so far representatives from CKFR and BFD indicate their agencies are moving in the same direction as SKFR.

CKFR Chief Ken Burdette said his district's board was expected to be voting on the process Monday, and a representative from BFD said he expected the issue to be presented to the Bremerton City Council soon.

If all three agencies agree to move forward, Senter said officials from each will begin the process of assembling a plan for

full integration — or a “regional fire authority.” Once such a plan is created, each agency's board will have to formally approve it, and then the final step before such an authority can be created is getting approval from the voters at an election.

Senter pointed to two examples of other fire agencies completing a similar process.

“Recently, the cities of Auburn, Algona and Pacific became the first to use the new legislation to fully integrate (into a regional fire authority), and currently the city of Centralia and Lewis County Fire District 12 plan to put their

integration plan before their voters this November.”

Launched last year by CKFR and the BFD, the “feasibility study” by Emergency Services Consulting inc. (ESCi) was later expanded to include SKFR before its completion in June.

After reviewing each department's revenue, territory and operations, ESCi determined the three are often duplicating each other's efforts, particularly in administrative and support services, and recommended the three fully integrate into a regional fire authority.

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NEWS

SKFR chief says work just beginning as merger study approved

March 5, 2010 6:15 pm

Tags: [South Kitsap](#)



Now that the Bremerton City Council has approved further study of a merger between South Kitsap Fire and Rescue and the Bremerton Fire Department, SKFR Chief Wayne Senter said the real work begins.

“We are going to roll our sleeves up and go about getting it done,” Senter said at the last meeting of SKFR’s Board of Commissioners Feb. 25.

The vote advances a nearly 4-year-old effort to consolidate three local fire districts into one regional fire authority. After talks between Bremerton, South Kitsap and Central Kitsap Fire and Rescue fell apart last year, the fire districts are now trying a phased approach, with Bremerton choosing who it will merge with first.

If the study indicates that a merger with South Kitsap would make financial sense for both districts and provide equal or better service to residents, the City Council would have to re-establish a regional fire authority planning committee.

The committee would develop a work plan detailing how the merged fire districts would operate, which would then have to be approved by SKFR and Bremerton before going to voters.

Senter said the biggest and most time-consuming pieces of both fire organization’s budgets are the collective bargaining agreements they reach with their staff’s unions.

“These are the lengthiest pieces, and bringing the two together will be even tougher,” he said. “And making sure that both of them together don’t end up costing more, rather than less.”

The timeline for the study is six months, and Senter said “that six months is going to go by quick.” However, he said a lot of the territory has been covered in previous meetings and studies for the West Sound Regional Fire Authority, and the agencies will use as much of that work as possible.

Also at the Feb. 25 meeting:

- Senter said that SKFR is reviewing its mutual aid agreement with Pierce County Fire District 16, located just south of Kitsap County on the Key Peninsula.

Senter said Fire District 16 is struggling after failing to pass two levies in recent years, and SKFR is responding to Fire District 16’s territory more lately, with only two instances of mutual aid in 2008, but seven in 2009.

“We have to discuss these impacts and make sure we protect our citizens’ service,” Senter said, explaining that SKFR set a limit on the amount of mutual aid requests it will respond to from that district.

“If we exceed that limit, we will cancel the mutual aid contract,” he said. “We’re doing what we think is right without destroying the relationships between the agencies, which are pretty important.”

Bremerton Patriot staff writer Lynsi Burton contributed to this report.

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NEWS

SKFR officials want merger to proceed cautiously

South Kitsap Fire & Rescue Chief Wayne Senter released a more detailed memo this month explaining why his fire department feels a three-way merger between local fire departments should not be attempted all at once.

By [Justine Frederiksen](#) • June 18, 2009 8:24 pm

Tags: [Bremerton](#)



South Kitsap Fire & Rescue Chief Wayne Senter released a more detailed memo this month explaining why his fire department feels a three-way merger between local fire departments should not be attempted all at once.

“When you’re trying to eat an elephant, you should do it one bite at a time,” Senter said, addressing the SKFR board of commissioners at its latest meeting June 11.

The memo was released after members of the other two departments considering merging into a regional fire authority known as West Sound Fire and Rescue — Bremerton Fire Department and Central Kitsap Fire & Rescue — balked at a similar announcement last month.

“Three weeks ago, we had a very exciting meeting,” Senter said, referring to the May 19 meeting of WSFR’s planning committee where SKFR officials said that they felt the next move should be Bremerton joining with the department of its choice first, rather than all three at the same time.

“Some folks heard that for the first time then,” Senter said, adding that there were some “emotional reactions to our decision,” and a “very lively discussion followed.”

SKFR Commissioner Dusty Wiley, who also was at the planning committee meeting, said his board was not expecting the announcement to be such a surprise, nor to be taken as an affront.

“We weren’t telling them what to do, just what made sense from our perspective,” Wiley said. “Some said all decisions should have been made at the meeting, but we have better communication than some and just move a little faster than some. We also assumed that they had read (what we had sent out) like everybody else.”

Senter said WSFR planning committee member Brad Gehring, a Bremerton City Council member, then requested that SKFR “put together a report on how and why we came to our decision to make the project smaller.”

Senter then prepared a five-page report called “Evaluation and New Direction for West Sound Fire and Rescue Based on SKFR’s Interests,” dated June 2.

In the report, Senter alludes to four things the Emergency Services Consulting inc. (ESCI) study (which recommended the merger two years ago) identified as critical to a successful merger process: Command, Communication, Control and Culture.

- In regard to Command, Senter said WSFR “possesses some failures. On more than one occasion, all elected officials unanimously agreed to a set of tasks with specific completion dates. These dates were moved several times because of (vacations, other department priorities) and various other barriers to completing the assigned tasks on-time were identified. We place no judgment on these reasons; in the end, we did not accomplish the work on time.

- In regard to Communications, “It is noteworthy that at several WSFR planning meetings, elected officials from other agencies complained about inadequate internal and external communications; communication external communications was

adequate, but it is difficult to over communicate, and more could have been done in this area.”

- As far as Control, Senter said “the primary failure in this area was in not naming one person to be in charge. Control was shared and no one person was ever assigned to be responsible for forming the WSFR work plan... There was much discussion about naming a fire chief and charging that responsibility to one person; however, efforts to accomplish this were delayed for various reasons.”

- As far as Culture, Senter states that SKFR’s objective was to “take the best from each organization and capitalize on those strengths.” However, certain differences, such as CKFR using three-man engine teams versus SKFR and BFD’s two-person teams derailed that process. “Culturally, SKFR seems to have more examples of cooperation with BFD,” such as with agreements regarding cooperative incident responses and the Record Management System. “Conversely, every attempt for cooperation with CKFR has failed.”

Senter writes that “while there is some disappointment at not meeting our original goal all at once, we could meet the same ultimate goal by breaking the project into two phases.”

He goes on to describe BFD as “a natural to be one of the two agencies in the first phase of consolidation,” and that SKFR is eager and willing to complete the consolidation with BFD in a timely manner,” and will respect its decision to merge first with CKFR if that is the case.

In conclusion, Senter states that “It is unfortunate that some of our external partners feel surprised by our decision ...(and) we too were initially disappointed in facing what we believe to be a new reality. However, after thoughtful and deliberative discussion, (we) decided this course of action is the best utilization of our precious time, energy and money.”

The next WSFR planning committee meeting is scheduled for July 7, and Senter said he looks forward to discussing the matter further then.

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NEWS

SKFR's plan to merge with Bremerton Fire could add six firefighters

Array

December 31, 2009 2:20 pm

Tags: [South Kitsap](#)

Members of South Kitsap Fire and Rescue, including Chief Wayne Senter and Board of Commissioners Chair Gerald Preuss, met with Bremerton Fire Department Chief Al Duke last week to present their proposal for a potential merger.

"The presentation went very well and was very well-received," said Senter, adding that the BFD said it might announce as early as mid-January its decision to merge with either SKFR or Central Kitsap Fire and Rescue.

During CKFR's presentation to BFD, the agency announced that its chief, Ken Burdette, would be retiring next spring, and suggested that Duke become leader of the combined agency.

"Because of that, (Duke) has taken himself out of the decision-making process," Senter said, explaining that the decision will now be up to the firefighter's union.

After progress toward a three-way merger ground to a halt last summer, BFD decided to first merge with either SKFR or CKFR. Last month, it sent both agencies a list of questions to answer related to merging operations.

"The greatest challenge we share is increasing the number of response personnel who actually answer emergency fire and EMS calls," Senter and his staff wrote in the proposal prepared for BFD. "Together we can accomplish what independently we could not; providing our citizens "better service with the same resources is very much an attainable goal."

SKFR then provided detailed responses to 13 questions, including:

Q. Clearly state your preferred option for bringing the two entities together. What is your projected timeline for completion of this project?

A. "There are three methods available for consolidating BFD and SKFR, including an Interlocal Agreement (ILA), Annexation of the BFD into SKFR, and forming a Regional Fire Protection Services Authority (RFA).

"The best option in our mind would be to direct the fire chiefs from each jurisdiction to complete a plan for consideration by each respective elected group. Once the consolidation plan is acceptable to both jurisdictions, then an RFA planning Committee would be formed for the purpose of finalizing the consolidation plan and starting the RFA election process. The first year of the plan would include an ILA for funding as a bridge to taxes being assessed in the new service boundary and received by the new RFA. SKFR believes this effort could be ready for a ballot issue as early as November 2010.

Q. Are you considering outside assistance such as a facilitator or consultant?

A. "It is SKFR's opinion that both BFD and SKFR have exceptional staff fully capable of putting a consolidation plan together without the aid of consultants other than a minimal amount of specific RFA legal advice."

Q. Clearly explain the financial model you are proposing, in as much detail as possible.

A. "The recommended financial model for a BFD and SKFR consolidation is that both ... contribute (their) current funding levels toward the new consolidated department. The city can reduce some BFD budget line items ... (and) the net result is a reduction in the BFD budget and the opportunity to hire an additional three firefighters as an immediate result of consolidation.

"The proposed retirement of the BFD Asst. Fire Chief, Medical Officer and Training Officer add another opportunity to mesh our needs, hire and assistant to training, and an additional three firefighters."

Q. Identify specific efficiencies within your proposal that will have a positive impact on Fire/EMS delivery for the citizens of our respective jurisdictions.

A. "A consolidated department will enjoy a number of efficiencies that result from economies of scale, elimination of duplication, and macro-service delivery strategies. Specifically, (consolidation) will allow for the addition of six firefighters, one half-time mechanic, one half-time facility/grounds (position), one half time IT (position), and one full-time clerical position."

After more than two years of discussions about creating a Regional Fire Authority — West Sound Fire and Rescue — by combining all three agencies, talks stalled in September, largely over financial concerns.

The West Sound Fire and Rescue planning committee was disbanded, and all three fire chiefs agreed that the most logical way to proceed would be to have BFD choose one agency to merge with first, and have the third agency join later.

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NEWS

West Sound Fire & Rescue set to disband

By [Rachel Brant](#) • September 15, 2009 6:34 pm

Tags: [Central Kitsap](#)



After two years of serious talks, Central Kitsap Fire & Rescue, Bremerton Fire Department and South Kitsap Fire & Rescue have doused the West Sound Fire & Rescue flame.

“This is a direction we’re all going to go,” CKFR Chief Ken Burdette said. “We weren’t going to move forward with three departments.”

All three fire agencies recently drafted and signed letters stating they are withdrawing from WSFR. SKFR fire commissioners approved the decision at their meeting Sept. 10 “to cooperatively put in the 30-day notice” to leave the regional fire authority planning committee. BFD and CKFR also signed similar letters.

“The three fire chiefs were directed by the planning committee to meet with attorney Ken Bagwell and try to come up with a consensus on what the new direction will be,” SKFR Chief Wayne Senter said. “We don’t think all three agencies coming together is doable at this time.”

Burdette said BFD first suggested all three agencies pull out of WSFR together instead of waiting for one agency to make the first move.

Senter said WSFR may be no more, but the three agencies plan to discuss merging BFD into either SKFR or CKFR in the near future.

“Once we withdraw from the regional fire authority process, it allows us a little more freedom on how we may do a phased approach to a regional fire authority,” Senter said.

Senter said official WSFR talks have been ongoing for two years, but county fire departments have been casually discussing a fire merger for the last 25 years.

“I see this as just really another phase of that regionalization,” he said.

The work done by the WSFR planning and steering committees should not go to waste, according to Senter. It should be used in future discussions about merging BFD into CKFR or SKFR.

Burdette said he hopes WSFR will become a reality someday and CKFR, BFD and SKFR will continue to work toward that end result in phases.

“The common interests we had when we started are still there,” Burdette said.

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