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No one agrees on how to keep costs down

By Joel Moroney
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Consolidation.

It has been talked about since the 1970s.

Mulled over in fire departments from Lehigh to Upper Captiva.

Hashed over at the union hall.

Studied by the county.

Analyzed by the newspaper.

Considered when Lee County's 22 fire chiefs meet to discuss local fire protection.

Everyone has an opinion.

Hardly anyone agrees what, if anything, should be done to provide better, more economical fire protection in the county.

Lee relies on a county-run ambulance service, municipal departments in Fort Myers and Cape Coral, a county department at the airport, and 17 independent fire districts governed by elected fire boards with the power to tax your property.

"We've taken the bullets out of their pistol, pretty much," Iona-McGregor Chief Gerald Adema said of arguments in favor of consolidation. "A lot of things that are supposed to make us more efficient and effective, we've pretty much done over the years."

To the man, chiefs say the county departments work extremely well together.

"We've been able to take the best parts of consolidation ... and put all these things into practice and yet keep our individual identities," San Carlos Chief Nat Ippolito said.

They point to hurricane recovery; a joint Urban Search and Rescue Team that was charged with protecting the East Coast from Washington, D.C., to Key West while other teams responded to Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast; mutual aid agreements and joint brush fire strike teams as proof of the collaboration that has 22 departments acting as one in emergencies.

"I don't know anyone in the county who squabbles over the fire lines," Bonita Chief Dan Gourley said. "If someone has an emergency, we come to their aid."

And they contend the depth brought by large numbers of command staff is an asset during natural disasters such as Hurricane Charley.

"We throw away all the titles, but since we have a depth of officers we have a lot of people capable of making decisions," North Fort Myers Chief Terry Pye said. "A large countywide department only has a few decision makers at the top and they (could) get overwhelmed very easy."

"We can bring that force."

And they point to Lee County's explosive growth and



Stephen Hayford/news-press.com

Fort Myers Shores firefighter-EMT Robert Rewis, 20, right, examines a medical history for Mary Norman, 78, of the Villa Vicente community while engineer Jimmy Burrell, 37, left, and firefighter-EMT Mike Mann, 26, take vital signs during a recent medical call. The majority of calls run by the department are medical. A growing population of elderly in Fort Myers Shores ensures their workload will increase dramatically.

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unions have literal control over salaries. They are totally redundant and could be consolidated."

Yet not a single independent fire chief believes it would be cheaper to operate a countywide department.

They point to the huge cost of schools and the waste and inefficiencies they believe would be inherent in a large metro system.

"They don't keep pace with the growth. They don't buy equipment like they should," said Jim Brantley, area vice president for Florida Professional Firefighters. "There are things that get lost in the sauce when you get that big. I'm not interested in seeing the good dollars people are paying for fire service thrown into that kitty and shaken out 60 cents on the dollar."

While the union admits there are opportunities for savings being missed, such as cooperating on a central maintenance facility, it doubts that consolidation offers real solutions.

"On the surface it is a dysfunctional way to do this ... and I do think there are things we could do to make better use of tax dollars," Brantley said. "But that doesn't mean everything we do is bad and that consolidation is the only answer."

But even horse-drawn fire wagons needed maintenance, and yet each district arranges service however it sees fit.

In Bayshore, the department gives a fire-maintenance provider cut-rate rent in exchange for servicing its equipment at a discount.

Several departments have their own mechanic. Some use a mechanic from the local garage.

They bid individually for fire engines. They arrange for construction of their own stations. And they pay separate insurance premiums.

"They know going in what their revenue is and look for ways to spend it," said Fort Myers Fire Chief Richard Chappelle Jr., whose department is funded through city council and not an independent board with taxing authority. "There should be a consolidated fire-service provider."

But most chiefs said they would have no interest in leading such a department, where they believe cost cutting would be the order of the day.

"I can't tell you that I agree that would be the best thing for the end user, but I can tell you that would be the walking papers," Jorgensen said. "At the end of the day, you still have to put the wet stuff on the red stuff and you still got to have firefighters to do it."

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