

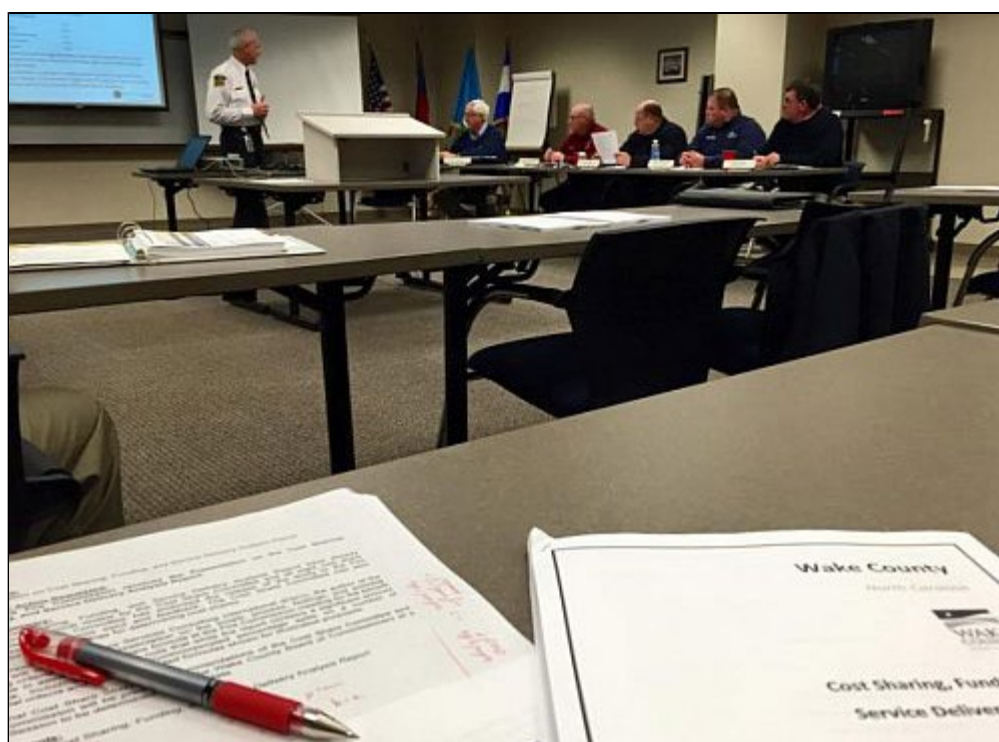
Fire Commission Meeting Recap and Mike Wright Appreciation

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Thursday's special-called meeting of the Wake County Fire Commission was notable for three reasons.

First, Fire Services Director Mike Wright introduced the strategic planning that his office has started doing, toward the future of the fire service in Wake County. Second, recommendations were presented on the cost share study that was recently completed. Third, Director Wright addressed his recently announced retirement of December 31, named his interim replacement, and received well-deserved praise for his time in office.

Allow me to attempt a recap. We'll go backwards, starting with Mike Wright. I've had pleasure of making his acquaintance in recent months. We've sat down and talked shop, and he's shared his perspectives on the fire service from thirty-plus years of experience.



Meet Mike Wright

Wright was raised outside Miami (in a town actually called Swamp Water), and first learned about the fire service through his neighbors. They were Miami firefighters. Career guys. Then his family moved to the Triad, and he learned about volunteer fire departments. In high school, he became friends with a Junior Firefighter at Pincroft-Sedgefield FD in Guilford County.

The rest, as they say, is history.

After high school, he was hired as a career member of PSFD. One year later, he was hired by Greensboro. That was September 1984. He was one of some thirty-five (!) hired. He continued to volunteer with PSFD through the late 1990s and then began volunteering at Colfax FD.

He reached the rank of Fire Equipment Operator in Greensboro, before leaving in 2004. His last assignment was Ladder 5. By that time he was also Fire Chief at Colfax. He held that position from 2003 to 2004. The split also gave him great balance. He loved riding the rig and did that in spades in Greensboro, while his administrative interest was

fanned at Colfax.

(Biggest fire while working at GFD? April 13, 1985, when "the entire downtown burned." He'd just come off probation. They emptied the city so companies could go downtown. County units were called to cover, which was unprecedented. Before then the "vollie trucks" stopped at the line and didn't enter the city. Wright was coming on shift the next morning, so he didn't get called back. The other off-duty shift got to fight fire. He remembers a lot of overhaul and rolled hose.)

But by 2004, Wright was ready for bigger things. He heard General Norman Schwarzkopf speak, who said, paraphrased, "if you're tenured but not advancing, you're being a bit selfish by not helping to take care of the younger members of your organization." And he and his academy mates had children who were becoming firefighters. He wanted to help them.

("Maybe administration wouldn't be so bad," he was thinking one day at a house fire, as the younger guys were working less of a sweat pulling ceilings.)

From Greensboro to Guilford to Wake

He left Greensboro (and Colfax) in late 2004 to become Deputy Director of Operations for Guilford County. The position was later changed to Deputy Director of Emergency Services. This was a reclassified position created as a head of county fire services. No, Guilford didn't have its own fire department. Rather and like Wake County in some regards, it was a collection of private fire departments. Plus the two cities (Greensboro and High Point).

The position was sorely needed. The county didn't really engage with the fire chiefs and their departments. Sure, the Fire Marshal's office was active with ISO and code enforcement. But things like mutual aid or standards of cover were left to the departments to work out. Which became the purview of the county firefighters association.

Wright worked in that position for nine years. Some of his efforts and project participation including merging the city and county fire department dispatching centers. That was a huge project that included creation and adoption of a county-wide number system (hello!). Guilford County also placed a "flying squad" in service during his tenure, a manpower unit that responded to structure fires anywhere in the county.

(Biggest fire in the county that he saw? Eastern Guilford High School, which burned in 2007. There over 100 responders that day, and maybe twelve fire departments. Initially he was Safety Officer. As more chiefs arrived, he was assigned to PIO after about an hour and a half.)

Last year, Wright brought his talents to Wake County. He started working as the new Fire Services Director on November 12, 2013. And he started talking with folks. Meeting with fire chiefs. Talking to boards of directors. Asking questions. Listening. Hearing.

And as he's been collecting information, he's been building a strategic vision. Which is simply "what's best for the citizens of Wake County." That's a compass point he's used throughout his career. When you're making difficult decisions for agency, he's fold of saying, you can frame it a single question: what's in the best interest of the citizens?

Meeting Recap

That takes us into Thursday and the Wake County Fire Commission Meeting, where a couple things happened.

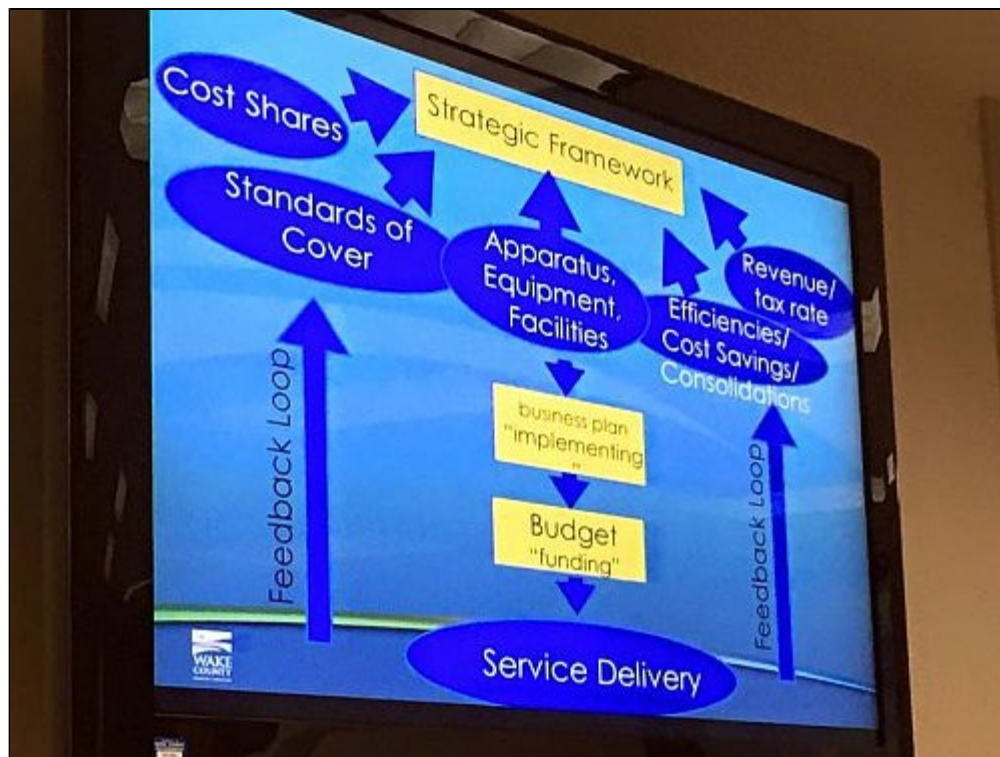


*Greensboro, 1990
(Sneaky scan from
history book in Legeros
library)*



Guilford County, 2013

Director Wright opened the meeting with a presentation on strategic planning. His office has been engaged in "heavy thinking" for the last thirteen months. And they've made some diagrams to explain the process.



The simplest one looks like this:

- Strategic Framework > Business Plan > Budget > Service Delivery
- And with a Feedback Loop wrapped around the whole thing.

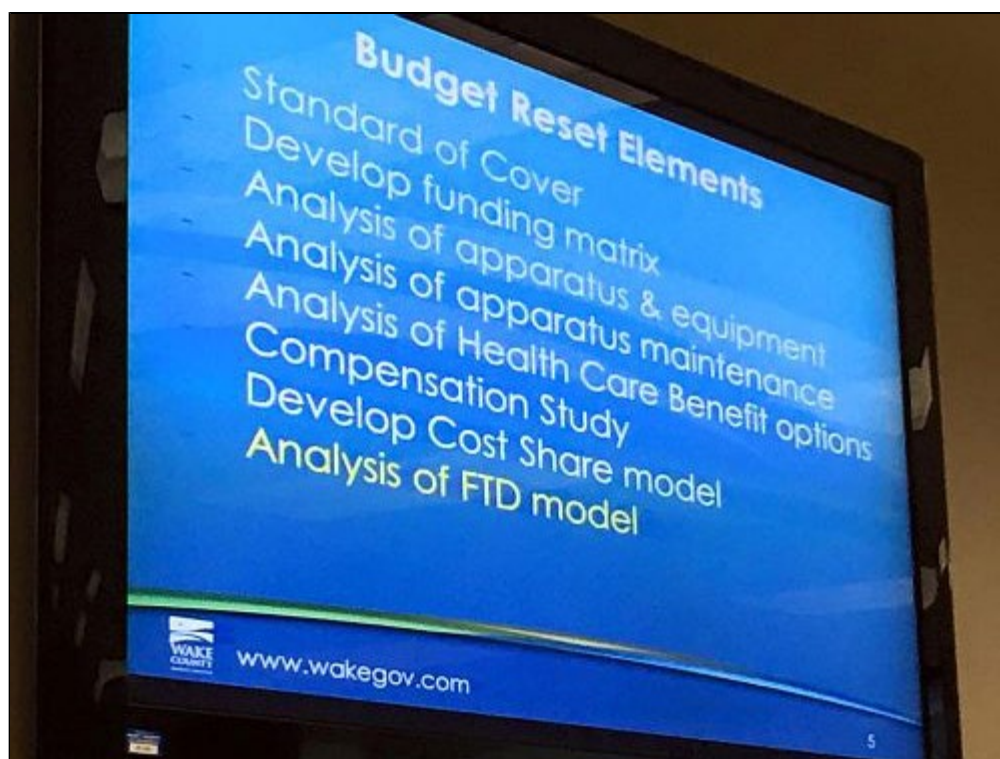
Need some plainer English? How about this, with annotations:

- Structured way of understanding what the county fire service both has and needs, which drives...
- Planning to meet those needs from financial and operational perspectives, which drives...
- Budgeting for those needs, and figuring out ways to pay for them, which drives...
- Delivering the service to meet those needs. E.g., the doors go up and the trucks go out.

Let's go back to the beginning of that flow chart. Let's look at "haves" and "needs." Those are the core components of the strategic framework, which were listed as:

- Apparatus, equipment, facilities
- Cost shares (where the county pays a portion of municipal-serving fire department budgets)
- Efficiencies, cost savings, consolidations
- Revenue/tax rate
- Standard of cover (e.g., defined standards for how resources are distributed and utilized)

So far?



The diagrams and slides also included the label "Budget Reset." That's a good summation of the goal of this strategic planning.

Wake County continues to grow, and its services are competing (and will continue to compete) for their slice of the taxpayer pie. For citizens to fully support the fire service when they come to the table, there need to be "ducks in rows." (My words there.)

Thus those five pieces listed above, apparatus, cost shares, efficiencies, etc. All of which funnel into the strategic framework, which will drive the assessment of "what does Wake County need" which will drive the discussion of "how much will it cost" and finally "how do we budget for the thing?"

How long until that strategic planning is done, you ask? Several more months. Might've heard July or September discussed. But it's certainly still underway.

Now for the second big thing presented on Thursday.

Cost Shares

The second presentation was about a study recently completed by Emergency Services Consulting International (ESCI).

First, some background. The county has "cost share agreements" with eight municipal-serving fire departments: Apex, Fuquay-Varina, Garner, Holly Springs, Morrisville, Rolesville, Wake Forest, and Zebulon. Some are municipal entities, the others are private non-profit corporations.

Each is contracted to provide protection outside of their respective municipal limits. The Apex Fire Department, for example, receives money both from the town budget and the country contract. The cost of their operational expenses is shared. Ergo, they're called a cost share fire department.

Got that?

But here's the problem. Nobody has a good, clear, defensible explanation for the annual amounts paid to each. Nor when those amounts are compared against each other. E.g., why does department X receive more than department Y?

What formula was used, when the cost share were established some years ago? What factors were weighed, such as area or call volume or property value? To find answers, county staff started digging. There were archived notes and general information and even former staffers willing to be interviewed. But nothing that provided an explainable, defensible answer.

Thus the commission of a study, which was tasked with (a.) assessing each of the eight cost share fire departments and (b.) providing a methodology for the future, for making the funding more "equitable, reasonable and defensible."

Still with me?

Remember that we're talking about only one piece of the strategic planning that Wright's office is doing. And that one piece involves creating a new formula, for distributing money to "cost share" fire departments.

The county released a draft of this study in September, and requested public input at a meeting on September 25. ([See prior posting.](#)) Comments were received from county fire departments and municipalities and they were included in the copy of the study that was provided on Thursday.

[See bottom of this posting for links to the study document.](#)

What was recommended?

Three things, per the Cost Share Committee. That's the group that's been evaluating the study and crafting the recommendations. They're composition includes Wright, county staff, and fire commission members.

Item #1 - Establish cost share percentages using the criteria in the study, and weighting them as such:

- Area - 7.5%
- Valuation of property - 20%
- Heated square footage - 7.5%
- Service demand - Direct measure of fire department workload - 35%
- Population - 30%

Note that each of these variables refers to unincorporated areas protected by a cost share fire department.

[See appendix for a translation of these percentages and how they play with sample numbers.](#)

Item #2 - The percentages for cost share departments should be recalculated every three years, to ensure the cost share agreements reflect the changes in service needs.

Item #3 - Replace heated square footage with total square footage, heated plus unheated. That is, if a central data source is available that could provide same

What was the reaction?

The fire commission members had some questions about the data that fed the study, and that will feed the cost share agreement computations. But they largely agreed and supported the recommended percentages.

No action was taken, however. The fire commission decided to defer approving the recommendations until the January meeting. To give members time to further digest what was presented.

Farewell

The meeting closed with Director Wright announcing his replacement. County Fire Marshal Charlie Johnson will serve as Interim Fire Services Director.

Wright is retiring from emergency services, and returning to the Triad. He's been offered a great opportunity for him and his family, and will begin working in private industry.

But, oh, the impact he's had with Wake County, and in just a scant thirteen months. His work and leadership has helped placed the county fire service on a long-needed forward-thinking path. There was a hearty round of applause as he was praised for his contribution and his talents in his position and his professionalism in person.

He's definitely left the fire service better than when he started. And, really, isn't that the point?

Congratulations on your retirement, Mike!

Other Notes

Critical tasks was referenced in the context of Standards of Cover. The collective (county staff, fire chiefs, fire commission members) has been working on identifying and defining same. This should lead to uniform expectations and/or implementation county-wide.

For example, say, rapid intervention teams. No matter which department responds, the RIT team serves the same purpose. But the specifics of who/what/when/how vary between departments.

By identifying and defining critical tasks, standards can developed so every county fire department operates the same with regard to both (a.) execution and (b.) expectation of execution.

Regionalization was also referenced. Wright a mentioned a meeting with OSFM, to discuss issues and impacts with using regional assets across multiple departments.

Thinking this means such resources as heavy rescues or ladder trucks. Makes great fiscal sense. One or two or three fewer trucks is a cost savings for everyone, if they can be shared and with no adverse impact on ISO rating or certifications.

Downloads

- [Meeting agenda](#) (PDF)
- [Strategic planning presentation slides](#) (5.7M, PDF)
- [Cost Sharing, Funding, and Service Delivery Analysis report](#), version as presented on December 11 (1.3M, PDF)
- [Cost share study recommendations](#) (PDF)

[All documents.](#)

Appendix - Cost Share Formula Translation

Included at the end, so updating is easy. Our math and logic might need correcting!

Let's imagine the Blogville Fire Department. They serve both a town and a city. Their annual operating costs are \$750,000. Of their annual calls, 50% are in the county. Of the people serve, 40% are in the county. Of their geographic area, 75% is in the county. Of their total property value and heated square footage, 30% is in the county.

Multiple those percentages by the weights proposed by the cost share committee:

Variable	Percent in county	Recommended weighting	Result	
Area	75.00%	7.50%	5.6%	e.g., most of the fire department's first-due territory is in the county
Property value	30.00%	20.00%	6.0%	e.g., most of the property value is in the city, such as, say, larger and more expensive homes
Square footage	30.00%	7.50%	2.3%	e.g., ditto for square footage
Service demand	50.00%	30.00%	15.0%	e.g., they run half their calls in the city and half in the county
Population	40.00%	30.00%	12.0%	e.g., more than half of their population lives in the city
			40.88%	

The computed cost share for the county is 40.88%.

For Blogville's \$750,000 budget, \$306,562 will be paid by the county. The municipality will have to fund the remainder.

Make sense?

First and foremost, good luck in your retirement! Sad to see someone with a whole different outlook leave so early.

Silver ([Email](#)) - 12/17/14 - 09:32

Name: (real name
preferred)

E-mail: (optional)

Web Site: (optional)

Remember personal info?

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No

Comment:

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Comment moderation is enabled on this site. This means that your comment will not be visible on this site until it has been approved by an editor.

To prevent spam we require you to answer this silly question

What are the FIRST TWO LETTERS of the word 'fire'?

[\(Register your username / Log in\)](#)

Notify: Yes, send me email when someone replies.

Hide email: Yes, hide my email address.

Small print: All html tags except and <i> will be removed from your comment. You can make links by just typing the url or mail-address.