

**ASSEMBLY**

The New Hanover County Board of Commissioners held a Work Session with the New Hanover County Board of Fire Commissioners on Thursday, April 30, 1998, at 6:15 P.M. in the Second Floor Conference Room of the New Hanover County Library, 201 Chestnut Street, Wilmington, North Carolina.

Members present were: Commissioners Buzz Birzenieks; Ted Davis, Jr.; Charles R. Howell; Vice-Chairman Robert G. Greer; Chairman William A. Caster; County Manager, Allen O'Neal; Assistant County Attorney, Kemp Burpeau; and Clerk to the Board, Lucie F. Harrell.

Members present from the Board of Fire Commissioners were: Dominic A. Bianco, Chairman; Brenda "Ben" Brow; Mike Denniston; Wayne L. Hartsell, Sr.; James W. Sawyer; Wilbur Davis; Michial W. Rhodes; and Jonathan A. Wrenn.

Chairman Caster called the meeting to order and welcomed the members of the Board of Fire Commissioners. He stated the purpose of the meeting was to hear findings of the New Hanover County Fire Services Feasibility Study performed by the Emergency Services Consulting Group.

Chairman Bianco called the Board of Fire Commissioners to order.

Chairman Caster spoke on the official opening of the Fire Station on Highway 421 North and he complimented the Fire Administrator, staff and firemen for sponsoring such an enjoyable event. The community has been well served by the volunteer firemen. As the community continues to grow, the fire service must be prepared to meet the needs of the future. The consultant was hired to study opportunities for the future of the fire service. Decisions will be rendered by the Board of County Commissioners at a later date.

Chairman Caster requested Fire Administrator, Phil Kouwe, to provide background information on the need for the study.

Fire Administrator Kouwe reported the fire study was performed as a result of the Board of Fire Commissioners being faced with three major issues: (1) the impact of annexation; (2) concern for the need to integrate career personnel into the fire service; and (3) the infrastructure, which involves whether the County should assume the lead role in purchasing and maintaining the apparatus and stations or continue to allow this to be done by the Volunteer Fire Departments. A consultant was hired to review the entire system and present recommendations on how the fire service can be improved.

A panel was established comprised of a representative from each Volunteer Fire Department, a representative from the Board of Fire Commissioners, and a County Commissioner. The group was charged with developing a request for proposals. Three companies specialized in performing studies of this type were sent proposals. Three proposals were received and reviewed by the panel with selection of the Emergency Services Consulting Group (ESCG) to perform the study.

**PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS ON THE NEW HANOVER COUNTY FIRE SERVICES  
FEASIBILITY STUDY**

Mr. Tom Siegfried, a partner of ESCG, spoke on understanding the emotions that are involved with the recommendations in the study and noted that change tends to make people uncomfortable. In performing studies across the nation, a considerable amount of time is involved with developing recommendations that will work and can be implemented.

The Volunteer Fire Departments have provided a good system for a number of years with dedicated men and women who have built the present system. With continued growth, certain demands are being experienced across the nation. It is becoming more difficult to recruit and retain Volunteer Firefighters. Both husbands and wives are working one or two jobs and there is little time left to volunteer service.

The recommendations in the report are not being presented to damage or hurt anyone. The charge to ESCG was to review every agency with an open mind, evaluate the agency, and recommend how that agency could be improved. The report is divided into two major sections, the fire agency evaluations and recommendations.

Before presenting the findings in the report, Mr. Siegfried urged the Commissioners to appoint a group to serve as an implementation committee that will review and prioritize the recommendations based on the need to determine what can be done, and when it should be done. This will create a slow process that will allow time for good decisions.

ESCG has performed over 200 studies throughout the United States. Many areas are experiencing urban growth which demands a paid and volunteer fire service. Significant information was provided to the firm by the Volunteer Fire Departments. Appreciation was expressed for the level of cooperation and professionalism demonstrated by the fire departments. A wealth of information was provided when meeting with the Chiefs and Volunteer Firemen about changes in fire service nationwide. Keeping the Volunteer Fire Departments informed and involved will help everyone to understand the need for the study and change.

A survey was mailed to 350 firefighters with a response from 110 firefighters. The following concerns were expressed by the volunteer and paid firefighters:

- (1) Overcome volunteer versus career mentality. Think more about the customers.
- (2) City versus County department relationships. We need to get along and have more joint training.
- (3) Career firefighters are needed at each Volunteer Fire Department.
- (4) The need for more and improved training for officers and certification for volunteers.
- (5) Keep the volunteer firefighters.
- (6) Consolidation is acceptable if it is done in a proper manner. It could be a benefit for the citizens.
- (7) Improvement of the fire training program at Cape Fear Community College.
- (8) Focus more on the customer.
- (9) Is it time to change?
- (10) A poor day-time response.
- (11) Improve the fire protection of the citizens.
- (12) Better leadership.
- (13) Continuity between departments. Improve relationships.
- (14) Cooperation is better and improved.
- (15) County government has little use for the Volunteer Fire Departments unless they need something.

- (16) A merger will create more havoc.
- (17) Keep the tax dollars collected in districts where generated.
- (18) Accurate cost projections.
- (19) The Board of Fire Commissioners must have equal representation.
- (20) Improve internal communications.
- (21) Politicians do not always speak the truth.
- (21) Far too much politics.
- (22) The Board of Fire Commissioners is destroying our fire service.

Mr. Siegfried requested the Commissioners to keep these remarks in mind when reviewing the report.

The next step was to draft the report. Once the draft report was completed, Mr. Richard Trexler, a Field Associate, met with the Chiefs of the Volunteer Fire Departments to review the report. There were a number of concerns about the initial recommendations. After further discussion, omissions, deletions and corrections were made, the final report was prepared.

The following key sections of the report were presented:

**FIRE AGENCY EVALUATION:** The first objective was an analysis of the organization. The current organization has worked well for many years, and the County Commissioners saw the need to hire a full-time Fire Administrator.

Currently, each Volunteer Fire Department has a traditional command structure for firefighting purposes and a governing body or board of directors. The Fire Commission was established by the Board of County Commissioners to provide oversight of seven Volunteer Fire Departments.

After a complete analysis, it is recommended that a clear organizational structure be developed and put in place for the oversight and administration of the entire fire service. The first step should be to reorganize the Board of Fire Commissioners. Phone calls and comments have been received from members of the Commission about being uncomfortable with the current composition. Concern was expressed for not having equality across the board. Some Volunteer Fire Departments feel there is an inequity among Chiefs of the various fire departments.

One recommendation would be to appoint civilian representatives from each Fire District and one single representative from the New Hanover County Fire Service. This could remove some of the inequities.

Another recommendation is to establish a new organizational structure for administration and the management of the fire service. Currently, there is a Fire Administrator that oversees code enforcement with paid personnel. The Fire Administrator works well with the Volunteer Fire Departments and is of great assistance to the departments. However, there is concern about accountability and consistency. With individually operated Volunteer Fire Departments, there is no coordination, which creates fragmentation. In order to improve the overall fire service, coordination through a leadership position would be beneficial to the entire system. It is recommended that the full-time Fire Administrator assume the leadership role over fire services in New Hanover County.

The existing fire system has worked well in the past; however, with rapid growth and

increased demand on the system, improvements are needed. This is evidenced by outdated information, a lack of minutes for meetings, no short or long-range planning, and very little formal organizational structure among the Volunteer Fire Departments. In most cases the structure is terribly outdated and needs to be updated. The people in charge of operating the Volunteer Fire Departments are capable of performing the duties, but most of the volunteers have full-time jobs and do not have enough time to complete the reports needed to comply to mandated laws. The departments are trying to improve the service, but they need assistance. The proposed organizational structure and recommendation of leadership will greatly assist the departments in moving forward with needed improvements.

**MANAGEMENT COMPONENT:** After a review of each Volunteer Fire Department, it became apparent there was a lack of planning. It is felt the Board of Fire Commissioners and the Board of County Commissioners should develop a professional strategic planning process. The members of the Volunteer Fire Departments, volunteer and paid personnel, should assist with developing a plan to know where the fire service is now, where it is headed, and the methods to use in reaching and meeting future needs. A strategic plan would provide a road map for the future and assist the county in preparing current and future budgets. The Volunteer Fire Departments have done an incredible job in keeping up with current demands, but no vision or mission has been established. It is critical to identify the needs of the community served. Many people believe that silence is golden, but this is usually not the case. It may take a catastrophic event for the community to realize the need to improve the fire service.

Another critical issue is sound financial accountability. When surveying the Volunteer Fire Departments and discussing audits and accountability, there was concern for only requiring a quarterly financial statement from each fire department. The Volunteer Fire Departments are handling a great deal of taxpayers money, and a simple budget and periodic financial statement submitted annually are not sufficient. The County must implement sound accounting practices because operational costs will continue to increase. The existing system has been adequate in the handling of donations and contributions from the communities they serve; however, this has evolved into a business. New Hanover County has reached a threshold where a professional administrator should be made responsible for the day-to-day operation of all fire services. The first step has been taken with the hiring of a Fire Service Administrator; therefore, he should be given the direction and authority to require financial accountability and oversee the future fire and emergency needs for New Hanover County.

**PLANNING FOR FIRE AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL PROTECTION:** The future success of any organization is determined by the soundness and accuracy of its planning efforts. The planning process is a systematic scheme to manage systems, programs, and resources over a period of time.

During the process, discussion was held with a number of groups, including City Officials, the Wilmington Fire Chief, and Director of Emergency Medical Services. It became clearly apparent that the current system is fragmented. New Hanover County currently operates separate Fire, Emergency Medical Services, and Emergency Management Departments. The question to answer is why? Benefits could be realized by merging the Fire Service and Emergency Medical Services and possibly Emergency Management in the future. There is a need for additional career firefighters to assist with the response criteria. It is recommended that Emergency Medical Services be combined with the Fire Service with cross-training of the employees. This would enhance the volunteer training by having ambulances in the Volunteer Fire Departments.

Currently, there is the possibility of Emergency Medical Services being assumed by the New Hanover Regional Medical Center. If the hospital assumes Emergency Medical Services, consideration should still be given to develop a partnership with the hospital where firefighters and the ambulance service work hand-in-hand.

**PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT:** Based on the evaluation conducted, each Volunteer Fire Department is trying to retain personnel records that are required by state and local laws. Due

to the County's involvement with the Volunteer Fire Departments, a central retention of records is critical because of potential liability. Currently, there is a lack of policies and procedures, standard operating guidelines, rules and regulations, and health and safety programs. The Volunteer Fire Departments have tried to keep the manuals updated. To resolve this issue, a committee should be formed to review the existing policies and consolidate them into a manual to be used consistently by all seven Volunteer Fire Departments. The development of a central retention of records and a set of applicable standards will greatly assist the fire departments with maintaining the necessary records.

**STAFFING:** Based on similar agencies, the number of administrative and support personnel in the Volunteer Fire Departments falls within the low to normal range given the size and type of each department. More personnel is needed to assist the current volunteers in the departments. Apportioning labor through the use of committees is an important management tool. To involve younger people in committee work will groom them to come into the system at a later date.

Each Volunteer Fire Department should have an active Safety Committee. Safety of personnel is a paramount concern for departments. A Safety Committee and Safety Officers can provide the oversight necessary to ensure safe work practices and emergency operations.

With the number of permanent residents in the region and a large transient population, the operational staffing for fire protection falls in the low range. Only the County Fire Service maintains a contingent of career operational staff that provides structural and hazardous materials response. A regional approach utilizing automatic aid and resource sharing will insure a reliable structural firefighting response. This means that emergency apparatus sufficiently staffed by firefighters will actually respond when summoned.

During visits to the Volunteer Fire Departments, it was found that some departments were having difficulty getting volunteers to respond during the day. Fortunately, with mutual aid agreements, equipment has been furnished from other locations. This is a significant problem. Today, many businesses are not willing to allow volunteers to respond during work hours. As this trend occurs across the country, volunteer firefighters are being lost.

**CAPITAL IMPROVEMENT AND REPLACEMENT PROGRAMS:** It is apparent that the current approach to financing major capital needs is not in the best interest of the citizens of New Hanover County. Although each department has exercised fair management of capital needs, the lack of a long-range planning process for station placement, apparatus, and equipment has created a patchwork approach to meeting the needs of the New Hanover County taxpayer.

New Hanover County is ultimately accountable for funding of the Volunteer Fire Departments. A priority should be to initiate a long-range strategic planning process that will provide for a systematic approach to determine the true needs of the county in the short and long-term as well as a mechanism to meet targeted demand areas and hold each department accountable for prudent financial controls.

From the initial site survey of stations and equipment, it appears that the Volunteer Fire Departments take exceptional pride in their equipment, and practice maintenance procedures that will extend the life of the equipment. However, in the near future, some departments will need to address aging of facilities and apparatus. By planning on a county-wide basis, economy of scale can be achieved. An inventory of equipment could show that additional resources are already available within the area fire departments. With strategic placement and planning, operational needs could be met without each individual department duplicating equipment purchases.

The lack of planning on a regional or county basis will continue to put governing officials in the dilemma of having to provide large dollar items with limited resources. This could result in political pressure being applied through public support for needs of each fire department.

**DELIVERY SYSTEM:** There is concern for the lack of scheduled personnel in the Volunteer Fire Stations from Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The Commissioners were urged to supplement the Volunteer Fire Departments with full-time personnel on this shift to ensure the delivery of fire service.

The response time goals are within acceptable limits. A majority of the Volunteer Fire Departments have a response time of 8 minutes with many over this figure. This response time is not acceptable. A 6 to 8 minute response time for a county of this size is good. In order to reduce the response time, full-time personnel are needed in each Volunteer Fire Station.

**TRAINING PROGRAM:** One of the most important keys to a successful fire service is the level and type of training. Anthony Granito, author of *Fire Service Instructor's Guide*, has made the following observation:

*"A good training program is undoubtedly the single most important factor in producing and maintaining a high level of proficiency in any fire department. It not only produces high efficiency initially, but also affects future efficiency when considering the rawest recruit now being trained may be chief of the department or at least a senior officer in 20 or 30 years."*

There needs to be overall coordination and consistency in the training program. In order for a training program to be effective, it must develop self-confidence so the individual can perform correctly under stressful and hostile conditions. A training program must be systematic, and provide feedback to the trainee. Training should never be conducted merely to compile a certain number of hours.

One issue of concern is the lack of a relationship between the New Hanover County Fire Service and the City of Wilmington Fire Department. When discussing the issue with the City of Wilmington Fire Chief, there was concern about the level of training between the two fire services. The obstacles between the two groups should be resolved because the County Fire Service, both paid and volunteer personnel, could be of great benefit to the Wilmington Fire Department. Adequate training should be provided to County firefighters so they are accepted as professional firefighters. Resolving this conflict is a major issue.

**FIRE PREVENTION PROGRAM:** A better job should be done in fire prevention. This is an issue that does not receive much attention nationwide. People should be taught fire safety and more fire prevention programs should be presented in the public schools.

New Hanover County is responsible for all code enforcement and inspection of facilities. All Volunteer Fire Departments have a public information office in place. The departments provide public information, particularly during Fire Prevention Week each year.

Myrtle Grove Volunteer Fire Department provides an outstanding program and is recognized in the area. The department is excited and enthusiastic about fire prevention programs. Frequently, the department is called upon to provide fire prevention programs in schools located within the City of Wilmington.

While several departments provide handouts to the community, Wrightsboro is the only department that publishes a quarterly newsletter. This is a useful tool.

Fire prevention is an area that needs more attention. Informing the public is a tremendous asset in preventing many fires.

**FACILITIES, APPARATUS AND EQUIPMENT:** While visiting the Volunteer Fire Departments, the group was impressed with the facilities and the dedication of the personnel. Many facilities need money to make improvements and meet ADA requirements.

In many ways, all of the fire departments are working together in a cooperative effort. Stations with washing machines, air compressors, etc., are allowing other departments to fully utilize resources. All departments are using the Fire-House computer software creating the same forms for station activity lists, maintenance check off, apparatus and equipment forms. With the exception of Ogden, all stations purchase vehicle fuels from a local supplier. Capital replacement appears to be on a "it's my turn basis". All stations are linked to the 800MHZ County radio system. Most of the stations retained the old low brand frequencies and equipment to use locally or use with mutual aid communities without 800MHZ capacity.

After a review of apparatus and vehicles, it was found there are enough vehicles, especially pumpers among the Volunteer Fire Departments. This equipment needs to be shared among the departments. The location of two pumpers per station with two reserve pumpers would eventually save the County \$750,000 in replacement costs. With some of the equipment owned by the Volunteer Fire Departments, this could be a major obstacle. Joint meetings should be held to encourage the departments to share the equipment on a county-wide basis.

Equipment is another vital component that contributes to the successful operation of a fire department. The items reviewed were hoses, ladders, small tools, self-contained breathing apparatus, and protective clothing known as turnouts. After review, most of these items were in good shape with a few recommended improvements.

A map was presented of the combined six-minute emergency response areas. The Volunteer Fire Stations are well located; however, there is overlapping in some areas. The Fire Commission should review the areas that overlap and the areas to be annexed. Redistricting or building new fire stations should be continually reviewed as annexation occurs.

There is one area of concern north of Murrayville Road. Rapid development is occurring and the response time will be well over six to eight minutes. A fire station should be located in this area.

**OPTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:** The data needed to perform the study could not have been collected without the cooperative effort demonstrated by the Volunteer Fire Departments. New Hanover County is experiencing tremendous growth and at the same time trying to deal with an aggressive annexation plan by the City of Wilmington that will create a considerable loss of revenue. The following planning strategies can be considered:

- Continue as separate and autonomous volunteer fire organizations.
- Functionally consolidate certain aspects or programs of the agencies. Many of the existing programs of each Volunteer Fire Department would benefit from functional consolidation. The fire chiefs of the departments have recommended interlocal mutual aid agreements with the exception of the City of Wilmington, who provides or receives little or no interlocal cooperation. Additional areas of cooperation should be reviewed, i.e., joint purchasing, overhead emergency management teams, vehicle maintenance, fire prevention services, consolidated training administration, fire administration, standard operating guidelines, and standardization of equipment. A strong policy of interagency cooperation should be adopted through which these programs may be implemented, including the City of Wilmington and beach communities.
- Operationally consolidate two or more separate agencies into a single fire protection authority with the governing bodies of the fire departments continuing to function. Frequently, an operational consolidation is viewed as a short-term measure that is implemented while the legal matters involved with a full consolidation are carried out. Many of the same tasks are involved in the planning and implementation of an operational consolidation and a full consolidation.

- Legally consolidate two or more of the agencies into a single new jurisdiction in accordance with State Law.

The process will begin with functional consolidation. All fire departments must come together and share current resources.

Organizational options for the execution of consolidated strategies are identified as follows:

**Option 1:** Eliminate all Volunteer Fire Departments and consolidate into a newly formed New Hanover County Fire Department.

**Option 2:** Redistrict the County's fire protection areas based on planned annexation by the City of Wilmington. Establish new fire protection boundaries for the existing Volunteer Fire Departments and eliminate or relocate fire stations that have lost districts to annexation.

**Option 3:** Consolidate functions that are similar or duplicated, such as administration, purchasing, training, record keeping, and maintenance, under the authority of the County Fire Service Administrator.

**Option 4:** Operationally, consolidate the New Hanover County Fire Service into a single fire protection authority. Existing governing bodies will continue to fund with the local identity remaining with each fire district.

**Alternative 1:** The addition of three (3) career firefighters per Volunteer Fire Department totaling twenty-one (21) persons should be hired and work directly for the New Hanover County Fire Service Department.

Each of the four options outlined are viable alternatives to improving the current delivery system. Any one or combination of options can be used. The key factors being recommended are full-time staffing; interlocal cooperation, especially with the City of Wilmington; full-time administration and management; financial controls; accountability; and enhanced fire ground and rescue operations.

The issue of full-time staffing to augment the reduced day time response of volunteer firefighters can be addressed by the first alternative, which will hire the necessary personnel to staff each Volunteer Fire Departments twenty-four (24) hours per day.

Based on the analysis and discussion, as well as experience with other similar fire protection issues, a combination of options is recommended. Due primarily to the aggressive annexation plans being pursued by the City of Wilmington, redistricting of the county fire protection areas will be an on-going project (Option 1). The County should consolidate all similar functions under the authority of the County Fire Service Department (Option 3). Finally, consolidate operationally all New Hanover County Fire Services initiating automatic aide and first response, eliminating artificial boundaries and planning future response criteria, station locations and equipment needs on a county-wide basis (Option 4). Individual boards should be maintained, and each board should be required to work together as a single fire protection authority under the guidance of the County Fire Service Administrator.

Any new fire stations should be built, staffed and managed by New Hanover County whether career paid or volunteers. The dedicated volunteers displaced by closing stations that wish to volunteer should be included in the new county-wide fire system.

Existing Volunteer Fire Departments that have a fire district to protect should remain in business. However, these departments should consolidate functions bringing administration, training, and purchasing under a single authority. If a county-wide system is implemented, the volunteers who have been displaced can be used in the system.

**FINDINGS:** The following items have been identified:

- **Financial Accountability:** The current practice of subsidizing each of the seven Volunteer Fire Departments without sound financial accountability must be addressed. The administration and management of the Volunteer Fire Departments should be placed directly under the County Fire Service Department for proper oversight as a single fire protection authority.
- **Staffing:** As evidenced by the County's insight to hire a full-time fire service administrator and the recent opening of a full-time County Fire Department, indicates that the first step to quality fire service has been initiated. In the analysis of current response time and call for service, it should be noted that response times exceed the 6 minute benchmark accepted as a reasonable response time for rural/suburban areas. Most response times are at the high end and exceed 8 minutes. This is not acceptable for a county with rapid growth. The difficulty experienced in staffing departments from 8:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, is having a direct impact on the response time. This trend is unacceptable and corrective action must be taken immediately. Two alternatives have been suggested to address the need for full-time staff at each fire station. The recommendations will address the staff needed to improve response times and volunteer augmentation. Also, the ISO rating will be significantly reduced. These savings will assist in offsetting additional dollars required to improve current service levels.
- **Stations:** Most of the existing fire stations are in good shape and strategically located. However, the need for one additional station and some redistricting is noted. The location would be in the Murrayville Road area. With improved response capabilities this station could offer an improved ISO rating. Currently the Winter Park Volunteer Fire Department is surrounded by the City of Wilmington and the current annexation plan will include the Seagate District. The new facility in the Murrayville Road area could serve as home for the 60 plus volunteer firefighters being displaced from those departments. The use, purchase or lease of the current equipment from these departments could offset the immediate need to purchase equipment for the new station.
- **Organization:** The study reflects the need to re-organize the current fire service structure. It is strongly recommended that the current system should be reviewed from the composition of the Fire Commission to the individual autonomy of each department. The Commission should be an advisory to the Fire Administrator and fairly represent each fire district with an elected or recommended individual from the Volunteer Fire Departments.
- **Revenues:** Each of the recommendations presented will assist with improving the ISO rating with potential savings to the taxpayer.
- **Redistricting:** With the annexation plans by the City of Wilmington, there will be a need to continue to re-evaluate the fire district boundaries.
- **Equipment:** The apparatus analysis shows an abundance of quality equipment throughout the county. The Volunteer Fire Departments have more than enough vehicles to adequately cover the service requirements for the community, especially with pumpers. Realizing that most of the apparatus are owned or have been titled to individual Volunteer Fire Departments, the fact remains that two reserve pumpers shared by the departments could eventually save the county over \$750,000 in replacement costs. Through the enhanced cooperation of each agency, this could be accomplished.
- **Interlocal Cooperation:** The lack of interagency cooperation with the City of Wilmington must be addressed and resolved. The duplication of services and lack of cooperation on response and planning are costing New Hanover County, the City of Wilmington, and taxpayers thousands of dollars each year. The two governments need to sit down and

identify the problems. With enhanced agency cooperation, all taxpayers in New Hanover County will receive cost saving benefits.

Over the past several years, regional fire protection has not only become a viable consideration, but in many cases, regionalization has proven to be the only practical means by which many fire service organizations have been able to survive and prosper. Independent organizations have found it increasingly difficult to unilaterally deal with funding, staffing, and service issues. There are currently over 200 fire departments throughout the United States that have elected to pursue fire and emergency medical service delivery through shared or consolidated services. This trend will continue as more communities realize that pooling resources is a practical option for dealing with increased service demands and shrinking budgets. The California State Fire Marshal has estimated that by 2025, there will be less than 200 fire departments in the State of California. There are currently more than 900 fire departments in that state.

ESCG recommends that with acceptance of this report, each of the Volunteer Fire Departments should adopt a joint vision, which recognizes the unification of fire service as a regional goal. Also, each jurisdiction should pledge to work cooperatively to improve operational procedures and consistency between agencies in order to reach this goal within three years.

The implementation of significant program changes can fail. Initiatives for change must be recognized and endorsed by all members of the Volunteer Fire Departments as well as the community being served. Change of the magnitude proposed in the report could be unsettling to many persons who identify their community with services provided by the local Volunteer Fire Departments.

It is believed that sufficient common ground exists for the jurisdictions to build on the strengths of each department's programs that will create an effective unified county-wide system. Frequently people fear the loss of community identity when fire protection agencies consolidate. Citizens often attach a great importance to "their fire stations", seeing it as an icon of permanence to the culture or amenity of a neighborhood. If the fire service moves forward with functional consolidation, each fire station should remain affixed with its sign identifying it as the community fire station, continue to wear their patch, and paint their trucks the same color.

As fire protection consultants, we have the opportunity to observe fire protection systems of all sizes and varieties. The Volunteer Fire Departments of New Hanover County are above average; however, change is needed. While separate incorporated Volunteer Fire Departments have worked well for many years, times have changed. Accountability and quality management are essential. The county fire services should be placed under the management and administration of the New Hanover County Fire Service Department to provide clear and consistent management in the future. There is a need to consolidate certain programs, standardize qualifications, and develop a capital program for purchase and replacement of apparatus. The Volunteer Fire Departments have done a commendable job of serving their respective communities. There is an opportunity for the departments to further improve their capabilities and continue to provide excellent service to the constituents of New Hanover County.

Mr. Siegfried expressed appreciation to the Board for being able to perform the study and offered to answer any questions.

Chairman Caster commented on discussion being held with the City of Wilmington Fire Department and asked if any discussion had occurred with the beach communities?

Mr. Siegfried responded that no discussion was held with the beach communities during the study; however, if the County pursues functional consolidation and continues mutual aid agreements, the beach communities should be included.

Discussion was held on Emergency Medical Services being transferred to New Hanover Regional Medical Center. Commissioner Birzenieks stated the service will be transferred to the hospital, and reported the President/CEO of the Medical Center and the Hospital Board of Trustees are very interested in working with the local fire departments to integrate, consolidate and provide the best first response service.

Chairman Caster commented on the inter-agency committee and requested an explanation of this issue.

Mr. Siegfried responded a committee would have to be appointed to sit down and study the information in the report. The items must be reviewed and prioritized with development of an implementation plan in phases. The first step is to make changes internally and the move to external agencies. The relationship between the City of Wilmington Fire Department and New Hanover County Fire Service is poor. It is important to address and resolve the conflicts between both groups.

Discussion occurred on whether the inter-agency committee should be a separate group from the Board of Fire Commissioners. Mr. Siegfried advised that discussion has occurred on this issue, and the Board of County Commissioners will have to make the decision. He advised the present Board of Fire Commissioners could be charged with the responsibility.

Commissioner Birzenieks asked Mr. Siegfried if he would be comfortable with assigning this responsibility to the Board of Fire Commissioners?

Mr. Siegfried responded the present Commission could be assigned the responsibility; however, the Board of County Commissioners may want to restructure the Board of Fire Commissioners as recommended in the report.

Further discussion followed on the restructuring of the Board of Fire Commissioners. Mr. Siegfried reported the Commission could be comprised of taxpayers in the community representing the fire districts with each fire chief appointing a representative annually to serve on the Commission. The Volunteer Fire Departments need to have one representative on the Board of Fire Commissioners.

Ms. Brenda Brow stated as a community at-large member of the Board of Fire Commissioners, she felt that a representative of each fire department should be appointed to serve on the Commission because of the lack of trust among the fire departments. She advised the community at-large was not very supportive of the Board of Fire Commissioners.

Mr. Siegfried stated the question to be answered is whether a Fire Commission is really needed?

Vice-Chairman Greer requested Ms. Brown to explain her statement concerning the lack of community support for the Board of Fire Commissioners.

Ms. Brown responded with the lack of support from the community, it is difficult to recruit volunteers to serve on the Board of Fire Commissioners.

Mr. Michial W. Rhodes, an at-large volunteer fire department representative, reported many citizens in the community are not interested in serving on the Board of Fire Commissioners because they are uncomfortable with making decisions without a background in fire service. It is difficult for these members to make life and death decisions for firefighters. This is one problem with appointing community at-large members.

Mr. Mike Denniston, an at-large community representative, noted that community representatives may not know the fire service, but they can render objective business decisions.

If the Fire Commission was composed of a member from each Volunteer Fire Department, the turf syndrome would rule.

Mr. Siegfried advised another recommendation would be to review the structure and determine who is the responsible party. Who will take the leadership role to bring the fire chiefs together in making decisions. Maybe, something different from the current Board of Fire Commissioners should be considered.

Chairman Caster expressed appreciation to the members of the Board of Fire Commissioners for their informative remarks and stated, in his opinion, he felt there should be a combination of community at-large representatives and volunteer fire department representatives. People should not be appointed to the Fire Commission without some knowledge of the fire service. There are many people in the community who have been former firefighters or associated with fire departments that are qualified and would like to serve.

Mr. Siegfried stressed the importance of having seven or eight community-minded people serving on the Board of Fire Commissioners to assist with marketing the fire service in order to gain more support from the community. Once this support is received, the fire service can begin to move forward.

Mr. Dominic Bianco, an at-large volunteer fire department representative, suggested full utilization of the Fire Administrator, Phil Kouwe. In order for this to happen, the Fire Administrator must receive support from the Board of County Commissioners. Without this authority, a plan cannot be followed.

Mr. Wilbur Davis, an at-large volunteer fire department representative, advised that Mr. Phil Kouwe, the Fire Administrator and his assistant, Captain Hall have already proven their value to New Hanover County and the fire service. This office, particularly, Captain Hall, has been instrumental in assisting the fire departments to develop call procedures and assist with the paperwork.

Chairman Caster assured the Board of Fire Commissioners that the Commissioners were very supportive of Mr. Kouwe.

Vice-Chairman Greer advised he felt the Board of Fire Commissioners should be the advisory board that settle issues of authority. The Commission should designate the Fire Administrator as the leader who has authority to tell the Volunteer Fire Departments what procedures must be followed. It is difficult for the Board of County Commissioners to tell volunteer firefighters what should be done.

Mr. Siegfried advised the system was the problem, not the members serving on the Board of Fire Commissioners. This system has evolved for a number of years, and changes need to be made.

County Manager O'Neal advised the fire service has evolved from volunteer firefighters who have performed an excellent job for years; however, the County has become an urban area which places more demands on the fire service as well as all other governmental services.

Ms. Brow spoke on the opportunity to centralize the fire departments through the Fire Administrator. Possibly, a beginning point would be to decide whether a Fire Commission was needed. For the first time, there is a chance to restructure management and training which is needed and wanted by most of the Volunteer Fire Departments. If a few of the fire departments are opposed to restructuring the system, this should hold up the process.

Mr. Siegfried expressed grave concern for the Volunteer Fire Departments not being able to agree to participate in a new structure. It is difficult to believe that fire professionals will not try a change in structure. This is an issue of fire service, which is to protect property and save

lives. It is not a turf issue. The Board of County Commissioners should direct the Volunteer Fire Departments to go into a room and work out a system. If the departments cannot agree, something is drastically wrong.

Vice-Chairman Greer reported the problem could be the manner in which the Board of Fire Commissioners was established. It is apparent that some of the fire departments feel they are not being fairly treated because one year a fire chief from one department serves on the Commission and the next year another fire chief is appointed. It may be better to allow each fire department or each fire district to appoint a representative to the Commission and allow this group to decide on issues through a majority rule.

Mr. Siegfried recommended establishing a Board of Fire Commissioners with the Fire Administrator as the Chairman and the fire chief from each volunteer fire department serving on the commission. Charge the group with making decisions regarding the fire service.

Mr. James W. Sawyer, an at-large community representative, advised the ultimate goal would be for the Board of Fire Commissioners to become extinct; however, he was not sure the Volunteer Fire Departments could develop the necessary cooperation to agree and render decisions.

Mr. Davis advised at some point in time, the Fire Administrator will have to be given authority to require the volunteer fire departments to comply to uniform rules and training requirements. Many young people are not qualified to move into the top positions in the fire departments. Frequently, a firefighter with only two or three years experience in the fire service moves into a Lieutenant or Captain's position, which simply is not right.

Discussion was held on the poor relationship between the New Hanover County Fire Service and the Wilmington Fire Department. Chairman Caster advised he was not aware of this problem and he asked how this matter could be resolved?

Mr. Rhodes stated that many of the Wilmington Fire Department Chiefs were at a retirement age, which would resolve some of the animosity among the two fire services.

Mr. Tom Siegfried noted that the level of training was the main concern expressed by the Wilmington Fire Department. Most of the volunteers desire to become professional firefighters. When volunteer firefighters respond to a call from the City, frequently they are called names and sometimes asked to leave. It is imperative that someone sit down with the Wilmington Fire Chief and identify the problems so the conflict areas can be resolved. The City and County fire services must work cooperatively together to provide quality fire service.

Vice-Chairman Greer asked if the City and County fire services should be merged with one professional position overseeing the fire service?

Mr. Siegfried commented on this being an evolutionary process and recommended moving forward with reorganizing the New Hanover County Fire Service before approaching a city/county merger. He emphasized the importance of adequately training the volunteer firefighters and implementing a combined volunteer and paid staff to provide 24 hours a day coverage at all fire stations.

Vice-Chairman Greer stated he felt the first step should be to establish a group comprised of representatives from each Volunteer Fire Department, one representative from the Wilmington Fire Department, Wrightsville Beach Fire Department, Carolina Beach Fire Department, and Kure Beach Fire Department. Authorize the Fire Administrator to be in charge and allow the group to make decisions under the majority rule.

County Manager O'Neal recommended addressing the problems within the New Hanover County Fire Service. He advised the current system was not broken and stated it would not

require a great deal of work and time to fix the system. Once this has been accomplished, the City of Wilmington can be approached.

Vice-Chairman Greer asked Mr. Siegfried if he had completed his job?

Mr. Siegfried advised when the firm was hired, the commitment was made to stay and assist the county with going through the process.

Vice-Chairman Greer recommended that Mr. Siegfried, Chairman Caster, Mayor Hicks, Fire Chief Sam Hill, and Fire Administrator Phil Kouwe should meet and identify the areas of conflict between the County Fire Service and Wilmington Fire Department so these problems could be resolved.

Further discussion was held on how the members of the Board of Fire Commissioners would feel about losing their positions. It was generally agreed that this action would not be a problem.

County Manager O'Neal advised the report could be placed on the next agenda for acceptance. He offered to have the Fire Administrator to prepare a sheet outlining the major recommendations.

Vice-Chairman Greer suggested waiting to accept the report until the group can meet and be sure that all Volunteer Fire Departments are willing to participate in the restructuring.

Fire Administrator Phil Kouwe noted that one issue being heard was the need to develop an overall fire protection system whether through functional consolidation or full consolidation. The key issue is to develop a regional system. Restructuring will not require dissolution of existing organizations or remove the identity of the volunteer fire service. The purpose of the change will be to take existing resources and develop one system. If this occurs, the system could operate like a large fire department instead of being a collection of small fire departments. The fire department would have an officers board whose responsibility would be to deal with operational issues, such as equipment placement, staffing, standard operating guidelines, and deployment plans. Also, there should be some civilian group, whether the City Council, the Board of County Commissioners or a Board of Fire Commissioners, to oversee financial and planning strategies. The use of both boards will build the bridge for the fire service to become connected to the community.

Chairman Caster agreed but stated if this type of system is to be a success, the group of fire chiefs and firefighters must be a cohesive group that will work together.

Mr. Davis commented on the number of runs by the volunteer fire departments, and he stated he did not know how the Ogden Volunteer Fire Department responded to so many calls. The system needs to be restructured. He urged the Board of County Commissioners to use the report and allow the fire service to move forward. In his opinion, all parties involved should come together and make the plan work.

Mr. Bianco advised that two previous studies had been performed which were placed in a drawer and never acted upon. He urged the Board of County Commissioners to support the recommendations in the report and move forward with implementing the proposed plan.

Vice-Chairman Greer recommended the Board of Fire Commissioners working with the Volunteer Fire Departments to encourage each department to participate in the plan. Once this has been accomplished, the Board of County Commissioners can be approached for support of the recommendations.

Commissioner Birzenieks stressed the importance of everyone understanding that the Board of County Commissioners will support the recommendations.

**ADJOURNMENT**

Chairman Caster, on behalf of the Board, expressed appreciation to Mr. Siegfried for an excellent report.

Mr. Davis spoke on the meeting being very productive and suggested meeting annually with the Board of Fire Commissioners to discuss fire service issues.

**Motion:** Vice Chairman Greer MOVED, SECONDED by Commissioner Birzenieks to adjourn. Upon vote, the MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

Chairman Caster adjourned the meeting at 8:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Lucie F. Harrell  
Clerk to the Board