

## **CHAPTER III. RECOMMENDED PLAN FOR IMPROVEMENTS**

This chapter describes a recommended structure for the fire service in Wake County and provides several options and alternatives that should be considered in developing fully detailed plans. Specific considerations for five-year and ten-year planning are listed at the end of the chapter.

Most Counties and metropolitan areas never take the opportunity to stop, evaluate, and plan their future fire service system in this manner. This is an opportunity that should not be taken lightly, because it can be used to restructure the current unplanned system and to create a system that will meet future needs more effectively and efficiently. There are many different approaches listed in this chapter that should be carefully considered.

### **Overall Approach**

The primary recommendation resulting from this study is that the future direction of the fire service in Wake County should be planned as a countywide system. The present unplanned approach has 25 individual fire departments operating within a loosely coordinated system. The Countywide plan could be accomplished within a number of different structures. The system of separate fire departments could be continued, with some reduction in the number of departments, operating under a structure that provides increased coordination and cooperation among the departments. It would also be possible to consolidate all the fire departments into a single Wake County Fire Department.

The option of creating one large fire department headed by one Fire Chief is feasible, however it does not appear to fit the needs and priorities of Wake County at the present time. There are several capable fire departments within the County today and several municipalities that are growing and maturing. The full amalgamation of the fire departments could result in a significant loss of identity, independence, and local initiative which are important considerations, particularly in a system that is primarily dependent on volunteers. The desired results can be accomplished by creating a structure under which the County, the cities and towns within the county, and the individual fire departments can build and operate an efficient and effective system that meets the needs of all the citizens. The countywide system can be created and managed through joint planning, combined with ongoing cooperation and coordination among all the participating organizations.

Wake County is beginning to evolve from an all-volunteer fire service system to a volunteer-supported by career system. This should not be seen as the "beginning of the end" of the volunteer system. A well-managed blend of career and volunteer forces should be able to meet the needs of the County for the foreseeable future, if the system is well-planned and well-managed.

The existing volunteer organizations are an extremely valuable resource. Some of the organizations are strong, well funded and well managed, while others are having difficulty maintaining their operational capabilities. The number of independent volunteer fire departments should be reduced, in some cases because they are no longer needed to serve the areas they were established to protect. These organizations and their members can make a valuable contribution to the system, if they can be redirected to a different part of the mission. Some of the existing volunteer organizations should be merged to create stronger organizations to serve contiguous areas more effectively.

Several of the independent volunteer departments should become municipal fire departments, to gain the support and sponsorship of a local government. This should be

done carefully, in order to retain the organizational attributes that promote volunteerism. The growing towns have a compelling interest in supporting their local fire departments. The towns and the County will all benefit if the fire departments are developed as functional components of an efficient countywide system. The recommended plan would include municipal-career fire departments and both municipal and rural-volunteer (or combined career/volunteer) departments, all working together as one system.

### **Recommendation**

*Restructure the existing fire departments into a smaller number of organizations that would all function as one system.*

*The overall system would include municipal career fire departments, municipal career-volunteer combination departments, and rural volunteer or career-volunteer combination departments.*

## **Municipal Fire Departments**

The municipalities in Wake County are in a good position to work with the County to structure the future system of fire departments. Most of the incorporated towns in Wake County have contracted with rural volunteer fire departments; this has relieved the towns of the responsibility to operate their own fire departments. However, several of the towns have grown to the point that their populations and property valuations are equal to or greater than those of the unincorporated areas served by their fire departments. As this transition occurs, the towns are becoming the dominant force in guiding the development of local services. This trend is expected to continue as most of the population growth and commercial development is expected to occur in incorporated areas, because of their control of the water and sewer systems.

The residents and taxpayers of the towns expect their local government officials to ensure that they are provided with reasonable service levels with appropriate costs. This is becoming a larger concern to the elected and administrative officials of the towns, who want to ensure that their areas are adequately protected and their tax dollars go toward efficient and effective fire protection services. This is causing the town to be much more concerned with the management and operations of their local fire departments.

The most efficient overall approach for the County and the incorporated communities would be for all to cooperate in the planning and development of a coordinated countywide response system and to share in the cost and operation of those elements that can be most efficiently and effectively provided at a countywide level. A system of municipal fire departments, operating within a cooperative structure, can fulfill most of these needs.

Most of the towns will probably want to employ paid fire chiefs to manage their local operations and ensure that the needs and desires of the local communities are

addressed. Most of the towns will be able to utilize volunteer fire fighters to provide a major component of their needs for the next 5-10 years. The towns can also employ career fire fighters to supplement volunteer staffing and provide a range of additional fire and emergency services, depending on local needs.

In most cases the municipal fire departments can protect their surrounding unincorporated areas with very little additional cost. This approach would be much more efficient than the alternative of maintaining separate rural fire departments to protect the unincorporated areas. The revenue that would be derived from the distribution of the County fire tax would supplement the revenue collected from properties within the incorporated areas.

## **Future Role of Volunteer Fire Organizations**

Wake County currently places the responsibility for fire suppression in the hands of 21 different volunteer organizations. Although 16 of the 21 organizations currently employ paid personnel, fire response in the county still depends upon more than 700 volunteers as the primary fire suppression force. Each of the volunteer fire departments has different characteristics in terms of its number of calls, size of population served, size of response area, number of members, number of stations, number of apparatus, funding, and leadership.

The economic benefits of a volunteer system are easily recognized, when compared to a system that uses all career personnel. The cost comparison is only valid, however, if the volunteers can provide the level of service that the community needs, desires, and expects.

The volunteer system should have the capability to meet the needs of most of Wake County for at least 10 years into the future, but it is facing some challenges that will make the delivery of services progressively more difficult over this period.

**Challenges** -- The existing structure of the volunteer organizations is destined to change as a result of the factors that are evident in Wake County today. Some of the factors include:

- Annexations have virtually eliminated the primary response areas for some of the volunteer fire departments.
- Annexations have and will continue to change the size, shape, demographics, and tax bases of many of the fire districts.

- Growth is occurring in areas that are not adequately served by existing fire departments.
- The time commitment required for increased "mandated training" has and will continue to limit the number of potential volunteers.
- The shortage of volunteer personnel for daytime coverage is a concern at almost every department.
- Many of the residents moving into the existing districts are not "affiliated" with the local communities and are not oriented toward the volunteer fire service.
- The numbers and types of responses have changed significantly and, in many cases, discouraged active participation by "fire suppression oriented" volunteers.
- Current recruiting and personnel management programs do not attract or properly address the needs of potential new volunteer members.
- There is an existing need to standardize fire ground operations and implement an increased emphasis on multiple company training and operations.

*Retaining Pride within the Volunteer System* -- As a result of these challenges, some restructuring of the system is necessary to make optimal use of volunteers. One of the most important concepts Wake County must remember as this restructuring occurs is that the system must be designed to foster the individual identity and pride of volunteer organizations.

The current volunteer system has evolved without a plan and with a minimum amount of direction or "interference" from the County. It is only recently that the County has become directly involved in the administrative and operational affairs of the volunteer organizations. The existing system provides a high level of autonomy to each of the departments which appears to work well most of the time; however, it faces some critical organizational and operational challenges in the future. The County should not become so involved in the internal affairs of the volunteer organizations that their volunteer motivation is compromised. Instead, the County should focus on coordinating the fire protection system and utilizing the volunteers' capabilities, commitment, and leadership within the system. The future system will not be successful without the commitment of the volunteer organizations and their members.

Due to the challenges facing the current fire protection system, however, the County will have to assume a more active role in coordinating fire protection. Some volunteers may view a more active County role as a threat, however, the success of a new system will depend largely on the leadership skills of the volunteer chiefs, officers, and directors. Implementing a system that proposes to fit existing autonomous volunteer organizations into a structured role requires strong planning and leadership skills. Pride within the volunteer system can be retained if the County utilizes volunteer leadership to play a significant role in planning and directing the future fire protection system. This can be accomplished if the volunteer departments focus on their common goals and recognize the value of working together on developing and implementing consistent policies, procedures, and service deliverables.

*Areas Where the County Can Assist Volunteers* -- The County should take an active role in supporting and assisting volunteer organizations in several areas in the future. To take full advantage of the volunteers as a valuable resource, the County and the incorporated municipalities will have to provide more support to the volunteer system to enable the volunteer organizations to operate in a more coordinated and consistent manner. The County should concentrate on assisting in these areas:

*Automatic Mutual Aid Response* -- An increased emphasis on coordinated automatic response of neighboring departments and the establishment of consistent levels of performance should enable the volunteer organizations to function as elements within a strong countywide system.

*Training* -- The countywide system will need to provide a far more structured approach to training in order to assure that all personnel are capable of performing at consistent levels. Minimum certifications for positions and ranks must be established for both career and volunteer members.

*Human Resources* -- The success of this approach can be supported by assisting the volunteer organizations with human resource development services, particularly recruiting and retention of volunteer members. This support should be provided by the County. Consistent personnel management policies and effective human resource management programs for career and volunteer personnel will be essential components of an improved countywide fire protection system.

*Support Services* -- The County could assist the volunteers with budgetary and administrative duties. The Fire Marshal's Office has already begun to assist volunteer departments with the annual budget request process. Additionally, the County could coordinate countywide radio communications, purchasing, apparatus maintenance, and other services.

*Planning* -- The County could also assist with coordinating the strategic planning for the County. This may involve analyzing response times and service trends to determine areas of need.

*Ensuring Consistent Performance* -- The volunteer organizations will have to be held more accountable for their performance to ensure that the system provides a consistent service deliverable to all areas and maximizes both efficiency and effectiveness. The system must establish basic performance criteria for response and training, and ensure that each organization meets these criteria. (Refer to *Performance Standards* section in this chapter for more discussion). The most important objective for the next 6 to 12 months should be to develop a system of consistent performance objectives and standards that will be supported by the County and the municipalities and accepted by the fire departments.

### **Recommendations**

*Continue to utilize the volunteer organizations as the primary emergency responders for the foreseeable future, but the provision of fire protection by the organizations must be better coordinated.*

*The County should take a much more active role in coordinating and supporting the volunteer departments.*

## **Combining Career and Volunteer Efforts**

The future system should be designed so that career and volunteer personnel complement one another in the provision of fire protection. Career personnel should be used to support and supplement the volunteer delivery system, performing functions that are not feasible to accomplish with volunteers. Their primary functions should include staffing units for initial response during weekday daytime hours, performing maintenance functions, conducting pre-fire planning and fire code enforcement functions, participating in public fire safety education activities, and providing training and other services that support the volunteer system. Volunteer personnel should also be encouraged to participate in these activities to the extent that is practical.

At some point in the future, the County may need to utilize several 24 hour career staffed units to fill-in where there is an insufficient number of volunteers to staff a station. For example, the County may consider using four career personnel placed on a quint (a multipurpose vehicle that can function as a pumper, aerial ladder or emergency medical/rescue unit) to fill-in areas where volunteer personnel cannot provide consistent staffing.

The overall system will be strengthened if all career personnel are hired and initially trained to meet consistent training and performance standards. Although the career employees may work for different employers, a unified ongoing training and promotional system would allow the career personnel to advance and transfer within the countywide system, as well as providing the capability for them to perform their duties in a standard predictable manner.

Career and volunteer personnel should be considered as equal participants in the system. Uniform training and performance standards and an integrated rank structure should apply to both career and volunteer personnel. The Countywide approach should

fully incorporate all of the necessary support elements, including an expanded training system, to make these objectives achievable.

### **Recommendations**

*Design the new system around the concept of volunteer and career personnel complementing one another in their duties.*

*Develop specific policies and procedures addressing the relationship between paid and volunteer personnel. These should establish a unified qualification and promotional process that are tied directly to minimum training and performance standards. (The system should include an oversight mechanism to ensure that the participants meet their obligations as individuals and organizations.)*

*Utilize career personnel to perform functions that are not practical for volunteers to perform -- including daytime, weekday emergency response.*

*Utilize career personnel to perform maintenance functions, training, and to conduct pre-fire planning, public fire safety education and fire code enforcement.*

## **County - Municipal Cooperation**

One of the fundamental aspects of the recommended approach calls for the incorporated municipalities to join with Wake County in the formulation of a plan to provide fire department services to the entire county in an efficient and mutually supportive manner. This encourages the municipalities to become more directly involved in supporting their local fire departments, most of which would continue to depend on volunteers for the majority of their service delivery. The rapid growth of several of these towns, accompanied by increasing demands for fire department and other emergency services, has caused several of them to become concerned with the ability of the volunteer organizations to meet their future needs.

*Advantages of Cooperation* -- The County and the municipalities have a legitimate concern for accountability, both fiscally and in terms of the adequacy and reliability of the service that is currently provided and will be provided in the future. They must be concerned with justifying increasing expenditures, while ensuring that the needs of the taxpayers are met. The County's primary concern is for the unincorporated areas, while the municipalities are concerned about their incorporated jurisdictions; however, as a group they share the same concerns for the entire area of the county.

The County and the municipalities, working with the volunteer organizations, can assist each other by planning and developing one system to provide fire department services to all incorporated and unincorporated areas of the county. The fundamental objective should be to provide adequate and reliable service to all areas at an affordable cost.

The major benefits that can be achieved through joint planning and operations are:

- response of the closest fire department(s) to any emergency, regardless of jurisdiction and boundary lines
- the ability to access any or all of the resources of the system for any incident or series of incidents
- the ability of all components to work together as a unified operational system
- sharing the cost of major capital expenditures, special equipment, and support systems
- elimination of redundant and unnecessary costs and services

#### **Recommendation**

*Joint planning must occur between the municipalities and rural volunteer organizations in Wake County to improve the use of system resources and eliminate system redundancies.*

***Establish a Fire Advisory Board*** -- The primary recommendation of organizing the fire protection system in Wake County into a coordinated countywide system will require a focal point to make important policy and budget decisions. This focal point must represent the interests of the taxpayers and consumers, the elected bodies, and the service providers.

A Fire Advisory Board with five to seven members should be created to oversee the entire system, establish the foundation for coordination and cooperation, ensure service goals are met, plan for future changes, and make budget recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners. The Fire Advisory Board could include (for example:

- A County Commissioner
- A Town Manager
- A Municipal Fire Chief
- A Rural Fire Chief
- Citizen Representative(s)
- The County Fire Administrator

**Recommendation**

*Appoint and empower a Fire Advisory Board to recommend, approve, and manage minimum performance guidelines, policies, and procedures. The Board should be the primary source of policy direction for fire protection services, and should advise the Board of County Commissioners on fire service needs.*

## **Restructuring of Fire Departments**

The existing system of fire departments should be restructured to reduce the number of individual organizations (fire departments), while gradually increasing the number of fire stations. The below sections discuss the creation of *municipal* fire service areas and *rural* fire service areas.

***Municipal Fire Service Areas*** -- The municipalities can provide a "home" for several of the existing rural volunteer fire departments. In most cases this would change the relationship from a rural fire department which contracts to serve an incorporated area to a municipal fire department which contracts to serve an unincorporated area around its perimeter. This is a natural transition in the cases where the municipality is becoming the dominant component of a fire department's service area. It also fits in with the established practice of granting of extraterritorial jurisdiction to the municipalities in Wake County. The municipalities that protect unincorporated areas would receive a share of the County Fire Tax revenue in proportion to the area served.

The municipalities would become more directly involved in ensuring that the needs of their citizens are met. This can be accomplished efficiently by supporting and assisting the volunteer organizations. The individual municipalities could appoint career fire chiefs to manage and direct their fire departments, however they would also have the option of a volunteer fire chief.

The municipal structure would make the career personnel governmental employees, which would allow them to be assigned to code enforcement. This would also provide the employees with municipal personnel benefits and support systems.

Raleigh and Cary operate career fire departments that are well organized, well managed, well equipped, and adequately staffed to meet the needs of the cities for the

great majority of situations. Both cities are growing and have built fire stations (and are planning to build more) in locations that can serve unincorporated "islands" and fringe areas. The most efficient manner to serve these unincorporated areas will be to extend the coverage of the Raleigh and Cary fire departments to cover all of the unincorporated areas that fall within the reasonable geographic coverage areas of their fire stations.

If the unincorporated areas are not merged into a single fire district, two existing Wake County fire districts, Raleigh Suburban and Yrac, can be restructured to create a single fire district around each city. If the unincorporated areas become one district, the service areas for Raleigh and Cary can be identified within the larger overall district.

**Morrisville** is in the process of converting from a rural fire department structure to a municipal department and planning to move in the direction of primarily career staffing, 24 hours per day over the next few years. This plan recognizes that Morrisville will have increasing requirements for protection, with a growing commercial/industrial tax base, but will not have the resident population base to support a volunteer fire department. As this transition occurs, all of the area north and west of Raleigh will be served by career municipal fire departments -- Cary, Morrisville, and RDU Airport.

Morrisville should also continue to establish the capability to serve the growing Wake County portion of Research Triangle Park. This area will require a high level of protection. The revenue from the rapid growth should be sufficient to support a full-time career fire department.

**The Town of Zebulon** operates a municipal fire department and employs a career Fire Chief and a fire fighter. There is a separate Zebulon Rural Fire Department, however the municipal and rural department members respond to calls together. The two organizations should be merged into a single municipal department without delay.

Apex has a growing career staff supplementing a healthy rural volunteer department under a paid Fire Chief. This fire department can easily be transformed into a municipal department, which could serve the town, the existing Hipex Fire District, and additional areas that are not in the fire district at this time. Two additional stations are needed and planned for rapidly growing areas south and west of the Town of Apex and should be built as soon as feasible. (One of these stations will extend the five mile service area to cover the remainder of the unincorporated area to the county line.)

The Town of Holly Springs currently contracts with the Holly Springs Rural Fire Department. Rapid growth of the town is creating a valid concern for the ability of the all-volunteer department to meet the Town's current and future needs; the Holly Springs Fire Department provides a significantly lower level of service than most of the others in the current system. The Town has also annexed territory that was previously within the Ten-Ten Fire District (Fairview Fire Department) and added this area to the Holly Springs Fire Department's large service area.

The existing department has no daytime career staffing and does not participate in the medical first responder program. It has placed its emphasis on a contract to respond to a nearby utility plant at the expense of addressing the growing needs of the local community.

The situation suggests the establishment of a Holly Springs municipal fire department, however it may be more efficient for the Town of Holly Springs to contract with the Town of Apex for fire protection and for the Holly Springs Volunteer Fire Department to become part of the Apex organization, operating as a volunteer company of the Apex Fire Department. The Town of Holly Springs would benefit from a more regional approach to emergency response, because of the proximity of Apex, Fairview and Cary.

The rural volunteer fire departments in **Fuquay Varina, Garner, Knightdale, Wake Forest, and Wendell** could be converted to municipal fire departments with relatively minor changes. This would provide a governmental structure to support the volunteer organizations. The Town of Garner has plans to build a station on the west side of the city, which would be operated by the Garner Fire Department, and this would fit into the plan.

There is a sizeable area south of **Knightdale** that is currently beyond the five mile response area. A new fire station location has been identified south of the incorporated town which would provide better service to this area, however there is still a need for a station in or closer to the incorporated town. The existing station is in need of major renovation. The response areas to the north and west of Knightdale will be reconfigured if a "closest station responds" policy is adopted. A location for a third station to serve the Town's growing incorporated area should be identified in coordination with the Town's planners and with the surrounding jurisdictions.

### **Recommendation**

*Consider the transition of rural volunteer corporations into municipal departments, especially in areas where the municipality is becoming the dominant component of a fire department's service area.*

***Volunteer Fire Service Areas*** -- It will not be feasible to convert all of the rural departments to municipal fire departments. Three relatively large areas are expected to remain unincorporated. It is recommended to restructure the rural departments that serve these areas in order to create a smaller number of stronger volunteer organizations. Each of the three areas could be served by a combined rural department that includes all of the departments that currently serve parts of the area.

The existing fire districts should be completely restructured to coincide with response districts for the restructured rural departments or all of the unincorporated

areas of the County should be consolidated into a single fire district. Whichever method of restructuring is chosen, the response territories should be drawn so that the closest station responds to the location of the emergency.

The combinations of rural departments that appear to be reasonable at this time are:

Bayleaf - Six Forks - Durham Highway - Stony Hill

This department would serve most of the unincorporated area north of the City of Raleigh. Most of the Six Forks Fire District has been annexed and is now served by the Raleigh Fire Department and most of Durham Highway district is planned for annexation. The fire departments that serve these districts should be merged with the Bayleaf Volunteer Fire Department to create one strong volunteer organization to serve the area north of Raleigh. The Stony Hill Fire Department should also be included in this consolidation.

The Stony Hill Fire Department serves a large, sparsely populated area and has some very long response distances outside its tax area. The existing fire station is inadequate and should be replaced with a new station, west of the current location, however the district does not produce enough revenue to fund the cost. An additional station will be needed in the future to cover this area as it develops, however there is very little demand for an additional station in the area at the present time. The extreme northwestern portion of this area can be better served by fire departments from Franklin County. To create a stronger organization, the Stony Hill Fire Department should be merged with the Bayleaf Fire Department.

Wake New Hope - Rolesville - Hopkins

This department would serve the unincorporated area northeast of Raleigh, between Wake Forest and Zebulon. The built-up area of the Wake-New Hope district is being rapidly annexed by Raleigh, leaving the more rural parts to be served by the rural

fire department. The Rolesville and Hopkins areas are experiencing some residential development, but are expected to remain unincorporated. The Town of Rolesville is included in the area.

#### Fairview - Panther Branch - Swift Creek

The Fairview (Ten-Ten) and Swift Creek Fire Districts are both shrinking in size and growing in population at the same time. Cary is annexing parts of both districts and assuming responsibility for protecting the incorporated areas. The Town of Holly Springs is also annexing areas that were formerly served by the Fairview Fire Department. The unincorporated areas served by each of these departments are experiencing residential growth as they are reduced in area. Both of these areas could be served by one organizations which would operate 2 or 3 stations. Fairview Station #1 and the Swift Creek stations will not be needed in their present locations, however, a new station will be needed in the eastern part of the Swift Creek district.

The Fairview Fire Department has made significant progress since it initiated the program of providing career daytime staffing with County employees. The Swift Creek Fire Department, which was in need of major improvements when first reviewed, has made very good progress as the study has progressed. These two organizations could be merged to create a stronger fire department.

An alternative would be to combine the Fairview and Swift Creek Fire Departments with either the Fuquay-Varina or the Garner Fire Department to become part of a multi-station municipal fire department. (This would depend on the willingness of the two towns to divide-up and serve the unincorporated area.)

An alternative for this area would be to combine the Ten-Ten Fire District with the Panther Branch Fire District and the Swift Creek Fire District to create a consolidated rural service area. The reconfigured rural area could be served by a single