

How Many Fire Departments Does One Town Need?



Change coming to Cumberland Fire Departments

If you need a fire engine in Cumberland, one of four separate fire departments could show up at your house, each responsible for part of the town's 28 square miles.

Each has its own board of directors, its own chief and its own taxing authority. And right now, they don't have anything to do with the town of Cumberland itself, which means property owners get two separate tax bills every year.

But that's about to change.

"We've got one town, but we have four fire departments, four chiefs, four tax collectors and four deputies," said Cumberland Mayor Dan McKee. In 2010, voters overwhelmingly said they wanted to have one merged department, whether it be an independent entity or under the town's wing.

But there was pushback from some of the departments, chartered out of the General Assembly and used to their independence. This spring, though, the financial troubles of the Central Coventry Fire District, which *The Hummel Report*



uncovered more than a year ago, got the General Assembly's attention. And that helped legislation required for a merger pass late in the session. The bill was introduced and shepherded by Sen. Ryan Pearson.

"(Central Coventry) had a major impact in terms of the way the General Assembly saw the issue," McKee said. Another deciding factor? Instead of trying to move forward this fall, the merger would begin to take shape in fall 2014 with the election of a seven-member board, decided by all voters in Cumberland. But the department w
McKee estimates the savings will be 10 to 15 percent. While a board will be elected next fall, the actual nuts and bolts of the merger won't kick in until 2015 when the four districts will have to align contracts and budgets. Another challenge: two of the districts work on a different shift schedule than the other two and they have different tax rates.ill be independent and not come under the town's control, although McKee envisions one property tax bill coming out of Town Hall.

The other key provision of a merger: the new department will have to live under the state's budget cap on spending every year, something they don't have to do now. That was a factor in the near-demise of the Central Coventry Fire District, which we found had a 60 percent budget increase in the first five years after it merged.

"Right now, none of the independent districts in the state of Rhode Island have to abide by the state tax cap," the mayor said. "Yet when I pass budgets, my public safety, my police is under that tax cap, my rescue, my dispatch, our schools, every municipal department has to abide by the tax cap, yet those four independent districts in town did not have to."

Brian Jackvony is a Cumberland native who became chief of the Valley Falls department in 2007, after 24 years with the Providence Fire Department. He says there has already been streamlining and savings for the taxpayers.

Jackvony took over chief duties for the North Cumberland department when its chief left in 2011, right after voters said they wanted to see a merger. Jackvony said some administrative and deputy chief positions have already been eliminated, the latter with the cooperation of the union.

"We've consolidated on the administrative side, and that is acceptable and it makes sense," Jackvony said. "Now when you talk about the actual feet on the street, the firefighters who respond to the calls, we want to maintain a certain level of service that the people are already accustomed to. To consolidate and lose a fire truck and not have the fire truck three or four minutes down the road and have to wait eight or nine minutes to get the fire truck is not really a gain in my eyes."

The combined budget of the four departments is now about \$7 million. Rescue service is run by the town and is not part of the fire department's budgets.

"I don't want see this become a shell game where we're going to cut the budgets and we're going to roll the dice; nothing's going to happen," Jackvony said. "Why would someone vote for consolidation when they have a fire truck around the corner from their house, and say 'We're going to consolidate and I'm going to wait longer.?"

And most people agree that what happens in Cumberland could be a template for other cities and towns with multiple fire districts to follow.

"I think the communities have this same sense or the same feeling that our residents did: we're one town, we should have one chief, one tax rate, one taxing strategy in town," said McKee.

The Hummel Report is a 501 3C non-profit organization. If you have a story idea or want to make a donation to the Hummel Report, go to www.hummelreport.org. Or mail Jim directly at jim@hummelreport.org