A Study of Regionalism for the Fire Service in Cuyahoga County Ohio

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Abstract

As the economic downturn continues to put the financial squeeze on local economies, and budgets for necessary services such as firefighting are tightened, alternatives to providing service become mandatory. Across the Country, fire departments are slashing staffing, equipment, and closing stations to balance finances. Cuyahoga County Ohio has been hit especially hard by the economy, and the subject of becoming a more regional government and sharing resources is continually brought up. This paper reviews the economic situation of Cuyahoga County Ohio and the possibility streamlining fire services in an area with more than 50 fire departments.
Certification Statement

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

Daniel Sypen
INTRODUCTION

The economic problems in the United States have significantly hit the population hard in many different ways. These problems can affect the American citizen either directly or indirectly. People can have their own personal finance problems when they deal with the loss of their jobs, and possibly their homes. Other people are affected by the economic impacts of the areas that they live in. When the economy hits a downward trend, everyone is affected. Beginning at the top, the federal status of financial stability directly affects states’ economies, which in turn affects county finances, then down to municipal government, and all the way into the homes of the American tax payer.

Increasingly, individuals are hit hard by a straining economy by being asked to increase the taxes that come out of their pay checks, and paying higher prices for things such as gasoline, groceries, clothes, and the list goes on and on.

Recently, many areas of the country were significantly hit hard by the drastic fall of the housing economy. As the values of homes rose well beyond what people could afford, banks got creative with their lending policies. Many people got in over their heads with the homes they were living in, and then all of a sudden, as expected, the housing bubble burst. The American economy has hit a downward spiral ever since.

Many cities, towns, and villages across the country are dotted with vacant properties, which leave homes around them devalued from what they were originally purchased for. As homes become devalued, and foreclosures begin in neighborhoods, the municipalities where they are located begin to take a hit. All of a sudden, property taxes take a sharp decline, and cities are forced to make difficult decisions with the services that they provide. These difficult decisions
usually involve reducing the services they provide, or eliminating them all together.

It is well known, that one of the biggest ticket items in a municipal budget is safety services from police and fire departments. The typical procedure is to trim the fat off the municipal budget for services that are not entirely necessary. This could include social service programs, recreation programs, or basic services. The last items that are usually cut are the safety services. However, the economic crunch in some areas is so bad, that these necessary services are cut to the bare minimum. The fact is, if the revenue is not there to provide these services, then difficult decisions have to be made.

Many fire departments have faced this reality. The result is typically the reduction of staff for these departments, and the reduction of equipment.

This paper will focus on the economic crisis of Cuyahoga County Ohio, one of the hardest hit areas from the country’s economic crisis. Specifically, the fire service for this area will be highlighted, and solutions to maintain fire protection for the area will be studied.

BACKGROUND

Cuyahoga County is in the northeast area of Ohio, and sits on Lake Erie. The largest city and county seat is the City of Cleveland. Surrounding Cleveland are over 50 suburbs of varying sizes and populations. The county has the largest population in the state.

Despite the large size of the county, it is one of the hardest hit areas as a result of the economic downturn. The population of the county has significantly decreased since its height in the 1970’s of 1.7 million people. After the last Census, the population for the county was about 1.4 million people, and at the completion of the 2010 Census it is expected to be less. In fact,
Cuyahoga County is expected to have one of the largest decreases in population in the country after the Census numbers are counted.

The housing crisis hit this area especially hard in the last five years, as the area has one of the highest foreclosure rates in the country.

The City of Cleveland has suffered from significant reduction in property taxes from its population. Throughout the city, house after house are torn down because they are abandoned and come into disrepair. Also, unemployment has meant income taxes are significantly reduced. This is true not only of Cleveland itself, but also for the surrounding suburbs.

As municipalities suffer decreased revenue from taxes, fire services in these municipalities are cut.

Some of the examples in Cuyahoga County are the cuts that were made to the fire departments of the City of Warrensville Heights, Village of Cuyahoga Heights, and City of Pepper Pike.

In January of 2010, the City of Warrensville Heights laid off six firefighters among the 18 city employees who were cut to cover $2.5 million budget deficit projected for the year.

The City of Pepper Pike, which has historically been one of the wealthiest and affluent suburbs of Cleveland, cut its manning from four firefighters on duty at a time, to three firefighters. Also, the firefighters had to agree to a decrease in pay of 15 percent, as well as take forced days off without pay that equates to an overall pay decrease of twenty-five percent.

Many residents of Pepper Pike were angered at this cut in safety forces after the city bought a new 100 foot ladder truck for $750,000 in 2005. It must be noted that there are no high rise buildings in Pepper Pike, and the four cities that border them have their own ladder trucks, each stationed about a minute from the borders of Pepper Pike.
One of the biggest cuts to a Cuyahoga County fire department happened in the tiny village of Cuyahoga Heights in late 2009. Cuyahoga Heights has a population of less than 1,000, but has a large industrial base. In the past, the income from the industries allowed the tiny village to have the best city services that money could buy. However, because of the loss of jobs in these industries, city income taxes collapsed. At its height, Cuyahoga Heights businesses employed more than 22,000 people. Now they employ about 6,000. The loss of income taxes from the industries led to drastic cuts in city services. The fire department alone was cut from 27 members, down to 10. There is a possibility of the once well to do village, to be put into fiscal emergency, which is when the State of Ohio would take over the village finances which could lead to even more cuts.

The effect of the downsizing of these smaller departments causes a ripple effect among the other departments in the area. As departments decrease in size, there is an increased reliance of mutual aid from neighboring departments. This causes the resources of cities to be thinned out and burdens the departments around those who are hurting.

As these trends continue throughout the county, there is increased discussion of regionalization throughout the area. Regionalization deals with the consolidation of governments and the sharing of costly resources. This leads to a more efficient form of government, and better use of tax dollars.

Cuyahoga County is currently headed by 3 elected County commissioners. However, in 2009, the voters of the county overwhelmingly approved the commissioner form of government to be replaced by a County Charter government made up of 12 elected Council positions placed within districts, and headed by one elected executive.

This change in government is a result of the realization that a more streamlined form of
government is needed in order to improve the economy. Also, many stories have come out about corruption in the upper levels of the government.

The change in government is to take effect in January of 2011, and the county executive will be elected in November of 2010. Currently, there are several candidates who are vying for the position of county executive.

This form of government is expected to streamline operations within the county. According to the Charter committee, several county positions will either be eliminated or consolidated.

Another part of the regionalization talks is the streamlining and sharing of resources of the over 50 municipalities of Cuyahoga County.

It would be impossible to talk about the streamlining of government resources without discussing the fire services within the county. As discussed earlier, some of the largest portions of municipal budgets are taken up by fire services.

The expense of fire services is primarily due to the cost of personnel. After personnel are considered within the fire service budget, expenditures for other items such as equipment, training, and station maintenance are put into the budget picture.

The fire service is constantly evolving, and the public consistently demands more of it. In Cuyahoga County, pretty much all of the suburban fire departments also respond on emergency medical service runs. There also must be consideration for hazardous materials teams, and specialized rescue teams. These operations which are separate from firefighting require specialized training and equipment which amount to a hefty sum.
REGIONALIZATION IN CUYAHOGA COUNTY OHIO

In Cuyahoga County Ohio, there are 51 municipal fire departments that are responsible for covering 1.4 million residents within 458 square miles. Of these 51 municipalities, the largest is obviously Cleveland with a population of just under a half million. There are several small towns and villages with populations under 1,000 people, and their sizes are a couple of square miles.

Each of these small municipalities has their own fire departments. Consideration must be given to the individual budgets of these departments and the effect they have on their local economies. As stated earlier, the personnel costs are typically the largest piece of the budget pie, followed by equipment and facility maintenance.

The annual budget combined for the county to provide fire protection among the 51 municipal departments is over $200 million.

Within the 458 square miles of Cuyahoga County and the 51 municipal fire departments, there are 103 fire stations, 128 pumper trucks, and 62 ladder trucks. Most of the fire stations scattered throughout the County are within 2 miles of each other. This has led a lot of people to talk about the duplication of effort that is created by all these little towns and villages having their own fire departments.

The Cuyahoga County Fire Chiefs Association has acknowledged that some form of regionalization is going to be needed to reduce this duplication of effort and reduce the financial burden to the tax payers. However, there is no clear cut plan that has resulted from the discussion that has taken place about the issue.

When compared to areas that are similar in size and population, it has been found that
Cuyahoga County exceeds the national median service levels for departments serving a population of 1 million people. According to a 2001 profile done of fire departments, Cuyahoga County exceeds this national medium by: 47 fire stations, 42 ladder trucks, and 67 pumpers.

To help illustrate the resources of Cuyahoga County fire departments, a comparison was made against some of the areas in the country which have a county wide fire protection district:

1. Cuyahoga County - 458 miles², 1.4 million pop., 103 fire stations, 62 ladder trucks, $209 million annual budget.
2. Montgomery County MD - 496 miles², 873,000 pop., 33 fire stations, 14 ladder trucks, $109 million annual budget.
3. Jacksonville/Duval County FL - 880 miles², 740,000 pop., 53 fire stations, 12 ladder trucks, $97 million annual budget.
4. Tualatin Valley OR - 210 miles², 411,000 pop., 21 fire stations, 2 ladder trucks, $45 million budget.

The study and comparison of Cuyahoga County fire departments against county run systems shows that there is a great economic advantage to the sharing of resources and the streamlining of operations for service among several municipalities.

The question is how to use this information, to form a consolidated fire department out of 51 municipalities. A consideration must be given to the facts that each individual department has their own fire stations (most have multiple stations), their own personnel, SOP’s, and equipment that would need to be standard across the board. The department would also need to be under the control of one central authority.
The consolidation of a fire department is usually done according to a process such as follows:

1. A detailed study looks at the equipment, response times, and the potential cost savings.
2. Chiefs agree to coordinate response.
3. Departments agree to share services such as dispatch and training.
4. A single agency absorbs the existing departments.

It has also been argued by Vincent Brannigan, a professor with the University of Maryland Fire Protection Engineering Department, that fire safety in communities starts with aggressive fire prevention. This includes mandating buildings be outfitted with fire detection systems, suppression systems such as automatic sprinklers, and the enforcement of fire safety codes.

This brings up the issue that not only are the operations sections of departments required to be consolidated, but also the fire prevention services which are often a separate bureau within the departments, as is seen in Cuyahoga County.

REGIONALIZATION EFFORT IN SOUTHEAST CUYAHOGA COUNTY OHIO

As the regionalization issue heats up in Cuyahoga County, a few efforts have been made to make changes. For instance, in the area where I work, there was an attempt to form a regional ladder truck that would serve 4 communities. The plan was to have the communities of Warrensville Heights, Bedford City, Bedford Heights, and Maple Heights share the services of one ladder truck. One ladder was going to be used and housed at one of the fire stations with a
central location to each community. One firefighter a day from each participating city would staff the truck to respond on all fire alarms in the service area. This would guarantee that 4 firefighters would be available on a ladder truck for every fire call. The cities had agreed that any future purchase of a ladder truck for the district would be shared between the communities to save on overall cost.

The plan was very close to being put into place; however there was increased resistance from the firefighters unions for each city, and eventually the plan fell apart.

This effort was seen overall as being positive, however I do not believe it would overall have been a solution to the problem.

RECCOMENDATION

The regionalization issue would best be solved by consolidating each of the departments in the county into one large department. The first phase of this plan should be to standardize dispatching a communications amongst the communities. A central dispatch point would allow for coordination amongst all communities so that fire and EMS apparatus could be sent to the scene of an emergency quicker by allowing the closest unit to respond regardless of jurisdiction.

After the issue of central dispatch is in place, the steps can then be taken to consolidate each department into one large entity. This is when the plans for command structure, budget, training coordination, SOP’s, and equipment would be decided.
CONCLUSION

It is clear that as finances for municipalities become more difficult, a change in how we deliver our service will need to be done. The answer will be regionalization of some form. The example of Cuyahoga County and its 51 individual fire departments is a glaring example of how consolidation will reduce duplication of effort, and ease the financial burden to all municipalities in the county.

The process of accomplishing this task will undoubtedly be long and difficult, however the future of our region depends on it.
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