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Westshore Regional **Fire** District



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Efficiency and Effectiveness in Collaborative Fire Protection Services

Westshore Communities
Cuyahoga County, Ohio

KENT STATE
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for Public Administration and Public Policy

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Disclaimer:

This case study describes the Westshore Council of Governments Fire Consolidation collaborative project with insights from leaders of this collaboration. The story is told with the help of the researchers at the Center for Public Administration and Public Policy at Kent State University. We hope that by sharing experiences and lessons learned through this collaboration, we will help others start successful collaborations. Mayor Deborah Sutherland (City of Bay Village) and Mr. Phil Kouwe (Emergency Services Consulting International) contributed insights and information that made this case study possible. The case study is written in the first person plural (“we”) tense -- as though the writers were present and involved in the collaboration -- to enhance readability and ease comprehension for its readers.

Just the Facts:

Back in the 1970s, we formed the Westshore Council of Governments (COG). All told, our communities, which include Bay Village, Rocky River, Lakewood, Fairview Park, North Olmstead, and Westlake, cover 75 square miles. Over the years, our COG members have worked to develop programs which benefit everyone involved. Working together, we have revitalized our sewers, built a SWAT team, and created a regional dispatch center which serves over 250,000 citizens, while collaborating in other local and regional projects. Our COG has served as a model for other governments hoping to create regional cooperation.

Given our past projects in public safety, and the growing cost of public safety in small communities, we set our sights on working together to build a more effective regional fire district. With tax receipts declining due to the recession, we had few options. So, with the goal of developing a more streamlined, effective and efficient fire response team in mind, we set about developing the Westshore Fire District concept.

During this process, we came across Efficient Gov Now (EGN), a local government grant program run by a regional philanthropic organization, the Fund for Our Economic Future (Fund). The program offered grant funding for projects which used local intergovernmental collaborations to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government in Northeast Ohio. Viewing this program as a tremendous opportunity, we developed a proposal for our consolidated fire district and submitted it to the EGN program. We were eventually selected as one of the winners of the first grant competition in 2009.

This victory was critical to the progress our project experienced. In the months that followed, we hired Emergency Services Consulting International (ESCI), a consulting firm familiar with regional consolidation projects, and conducted a study of the capacities of each fire department within the proposed region. Through this analysis we developed a clearer understanding of the advantages and drawbacks of full consolidation. In the words of Bay Village Mayor Deborah Sutherland, “Through the study, we found that many of our partner communities could deliver fire services more effectively if they worked together than if they worked alone.” We were also able to better understand the concerns leaders within each community had about the merger, and this is allowing us to respond to them as we work to combine fire services among our communities.

“Through the study, we found that many of our partner communities could deliver fire services more effectively if they worked together than if they worked alone.”

**Mayor Deborah Sutherland
City of Bay Village**

“The decision, as a matter of public policy, to commit resources and staff into a consolidation is huge, and that is the decision you have to make first. That is not the same as the decision to throw the switch.”

**Phil Kouwe
ESCI Researcher**

While some of our partner communities want to consolidate, others are concerned about maintaining local identity. Because of this difference in goals, we have determined that consolidation does not have to include all communities. We have also determined that not everything needs to be perfectly aligned before implementation of one or more of the recommendations provided by ESCI in the study. Because of this, we have chosen to pursue individual recommendations while simultaneously pursuing full consolidation among some communities. Yet even this simple choice is a significant one. In the words of Phil Kouwe, ESCI Researcher, “The decision, as a matter of public policy, to commit resources and staff into a consolidation is huge, and that is the decision you have to make first. That is not the same as the decision to throw the switch.”

While we are still in a relatively early stage in the development of this complex collaborative project, there are some lessons which we can pass on, primarily from one of our leaders, the Mayor of Bay Village, Deborah Sutherland. She has reminded us that extensive and open communications are critical, as is a group focus on end results. Furthermore, given the complexity of this project and the large number of fire departments which must be consolidated, seeking the assistance of seasoned professionals was critical. Furthermore, the importance of leaving egos at the door emerged again and again, as progress would have been impossible without leaders being willing to set aside differences.

Westshore Regional Fire District

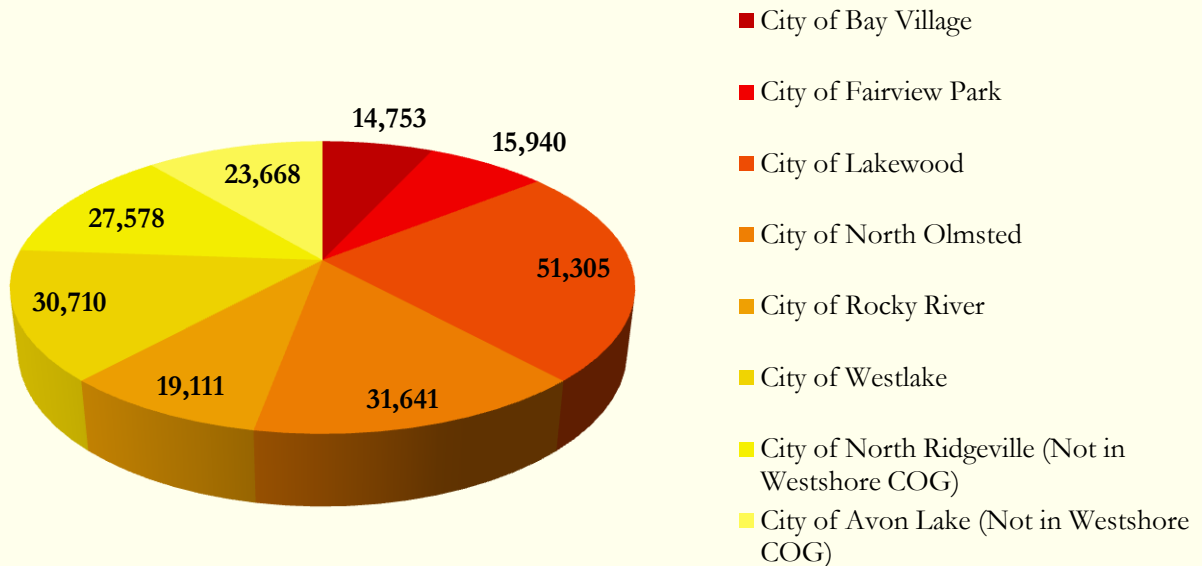
The Problem

A number of our suburbs on the west side of Cleveland formed the Westshore Council of Governments (COG) back in the early 1970's. The COG was formed to address regional problems and improve the lives of citizens in all of our member communities. Over the years, our COG spearheaded the creation of a number of important programs, including sewer systems, our SWAT team, our HAZMAT team, our Technical Rescue Team, our Fire Investigation Unit, regional hospital programs and the creation of a regional dispatch center, WestCom.

Gradually, the number of communities participating in our Westshore COG grew, along with the number of citizens benefitting from our efforts. As more organizations participated, more opportunities for cooperative projects emerged. One of the most difficult issues facing our communities came from fire and EMS services. Each community requires access to these life-saving services, but as the technology available for emergency medical response and firefighting developed, the costs of providing services also increased. As small communities, we were only able to finance relatively small fire operations. Unfortunately, many of the Westshore communities had fire response needs which outpaced the capacity of their individual emergency response programs. Neighboring communities regularly provided assistance to one another, which led to dependence on one another across our region.

We began to discuss some alternative approaches which would reduce costs for individual communities while preserving quality services. After lengthy discussion, we developed the concept of a regional fire district. All six of the Westshore COG communities decided to participate, and later, two non-Westshore communities, the City of North Ridgeville and the City of Avon Lake, joined as well (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Population of Partner Communities



The Opportunity

The COG had a long history of coming together to solve problems in our communities. This history of successful interaction created an important opportunity for improving our fire districts. In July of 2007, those of us in the six Westshore communities set up a Fire District Committee to study and implement a reorganization of our region's fire and emergency services. Through the Westshore COG, we developed a Request for Qualifications and began a nationwide search for a consulting firm. Though we had a general idea of what the Fire District would look like, we needed to develop a clearer picture of the way member departments were currently run so we could devise a plan which could successfully integrate them.

The Efficient Gov Now (EGN) program is a contest which a Northeast Ohio philanthropic organization, the Fund for Our Economic Future (Fund), ran in 2009 and 2010. Created to encourage local government efficiency through collaboration, EGN invited local governments to write and submit proposals for projects which involve two or more local governments working together to improve or expand government programs and services. The Fund invited citizens from across Northeast Ohio to vote on their favorite project to select the three winners.

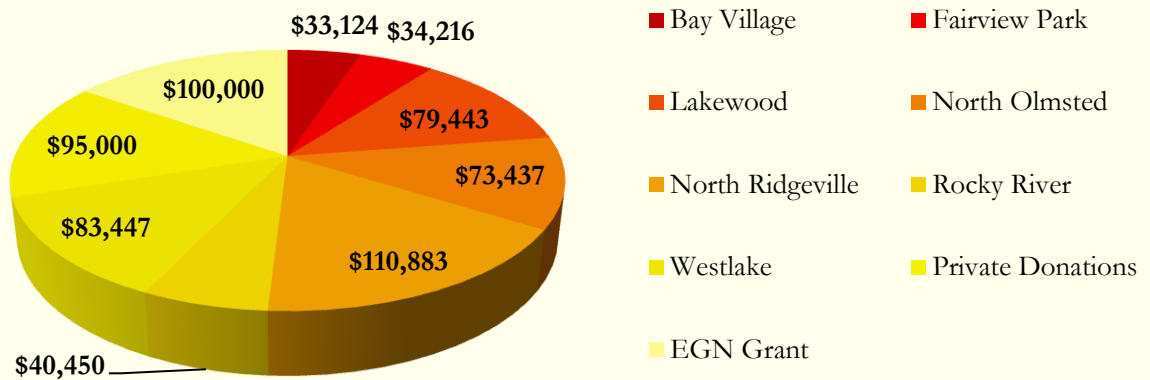
The Plan

In the Winter of 2009, the EGN grant program was announced. It presented an excellent opportunity for us to explore the collaboration through a study and fund the collaboration-building process. It was an appealing contest for a lot of reasons: it encouraged collaboration, rewarded good ideas and involved citizens in government choices. Some governments heard of the contest, and immediately set about creating an idea which involved collaboration. Other governments were facing problems which demanded a collaborative solution, and saw the contest as an opportunity to bring potential partners to the table, as a way to get funding for a project that was already planned. We began to develop a proposal to create a regional fire district, and titled the proposal the “Westshore Regional Fire District Project.”

The Proposal

In the process of writing the proposal, we found that North Ridgeville was also interested in joining the Fire District. With seven communities (listed below) offering funds to support the project, we developed a proposal which requested \$100,000 from the EGN program. The investments of each contributing partner are outlined in Figure 2 below.

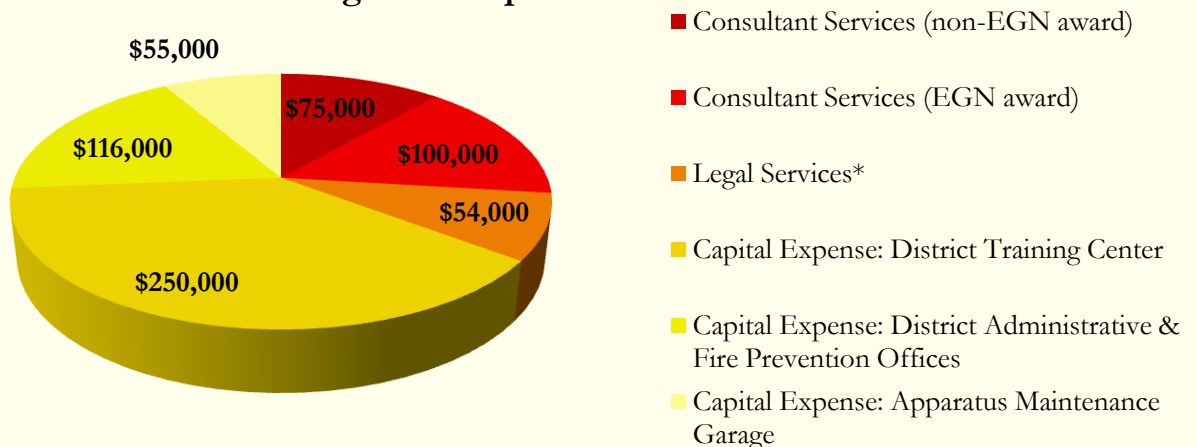
Figure 2: Contributions of Partner Communities (\$650,000 Total)



In addition to the contributions from member communities, private donors, and the EGN program, we also projected contributions from the COG itself, provided through membership dues (figures representing these contributions are not included in Figure 2). While these dues are based on a community’s population and property value, and are typically used to pay for COG staff, we proposed contributing some of these funds to the Fire District project. Additionally, non-member communities (North Ridgeville at this stage in the process) were to be assessed a fee to cover dues which they would have paid if they were members of the COG.

All of the requested funds from EGN would go toward hiring a consultant to conduct a study of the current fire departments. With this study, we hoped to better understand the benefits of collaboration, as well as the best means of restructuring the fire departments. Remaining expenditures, which would rely on the additional funding sources described above, are outlined in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Expenditures



The fire district consolidation was projected to save around \$1,328,000 annually. These cost savings were expected to come from better deployment of personnel, possibly reducing overtime, and additionally, reducing the need for major equipment purchases. Service Improvements would also be created by decreasing the response time of our fire departments. Improving our response time would fulfill one of the key requirements of fire insurance, thus decreasing the insurance costs for both of the cities and their residents. We believed that the savings produced by reduced insurance costs would provide additional resources for equipment, personnel and training. We planned to use the savings created by these practices to help expand the project by hiring a Sustainability Manager, hiring and training fire and EMS employees, and covering tax incentives to attract improved IT and Medical Research businesses into the region.

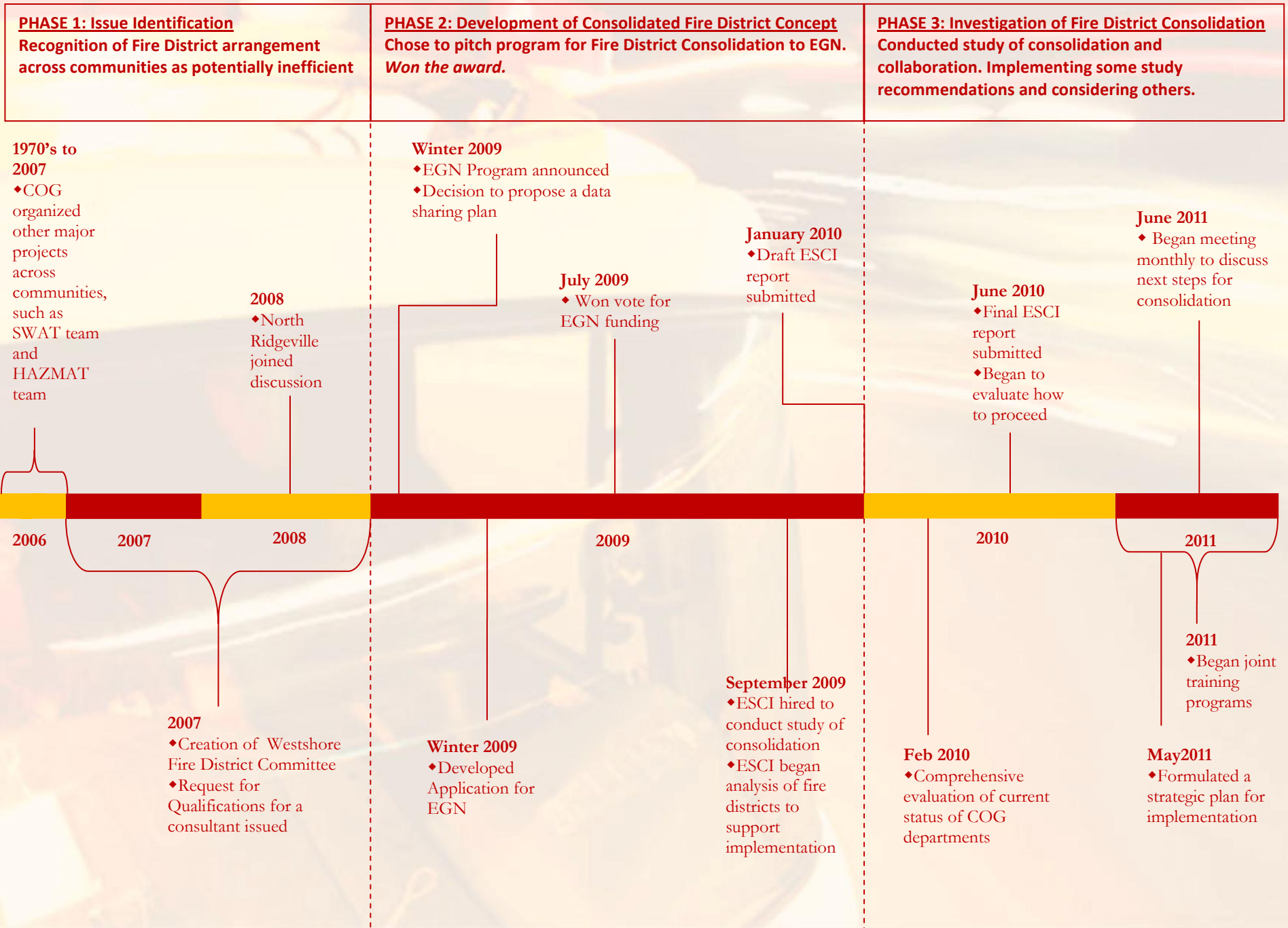
To manage the administration of the project, we added a new line item to the Westshore COG budget. We planned to process accounting reports and purchase orders through Bay Village’s Finance Director, as they were already serving as Westshore COG’s fiscal officer. The project called for legal management to be handled by the legal capacities of the municipalities that participated.

The main goal of the fire district consolidation project was to develop a plan and to fully integrate our fire operations within five years. As the proposal developed, we became increasingly convinced that a regional fire district would provide the safest, most efficient, and most professional service possible. We hoped to accomplish the creation of the regional fire district while focusing on the needs of citizens, fostering additional collaboration among the Westshore fire departments, and creating a more efficient and effective fire district. We also hoped to create fire districts with improved ISO ratings of the fire protection with each community. These ISO ratings are based on water resources, the quality of the fire districts, and the public communication systems. Finally, we believed that this project served as another important step towards coordinating regional planning and standardized programming across communities in our area. The implementation timeline included in the original proposal is detailed below in Figure 4, and a full timeline of the project to date is included on the following page in Figure 5.

Figure 4: Original Timeline for Implementation



Figure 5: Complete Timeline of Fire District Consolidation



The Reality

We turned in the proposal with high hopes. After a careful marketing campaign and public votes, we were awarded the \$100,000 grant. By the time the voting process was complete, we had already successfully released the Request for Qualifications (RFQ) in our search for consultants. After a nationwide search, we hired Emergency Services Consulting International, Inc (ESCI) in September of 2009 to study the current set of fire departments in the Westshore region to help us move forward in implementing collaborative arrangements among the communities involved.

The Progress

ESCI studied each of the partnering fire and EMS systems: crews, equipment, locations, communications, procedures and management. They also examined our road and rail systems to calculate the response times from community to community to determine the best location for stations in the regional system. They used a benchmark of 4 minutes from call to arrival under typical driving conditions, and found that most of the Westshore communities were under this mark -- except for Bay Village and North Ridgeville. Bay Village's fire stations were not close enough for some of its citizens to receive a response in the 4 minute time period. ESCI advised that Bay Village might want to consider building another station. North Ridgeville, a community that is going through a lot of rapid growth, was given the same advice.

ESCI also held public hearings to get additional input from residents, and interviewed some of the fire and EMS personnel. They offered draft recommendations to each community for consideration. They used feedback to adjust recommendations.

Throughout this process, there were obstacles as well as new insights. There was a data reporting error from North Olmstead which required ESCI to analyze and revise report findings. Progress was slowed further when one of the ESCI staff members passed away unexpectedly in early 2010. The staff in ESCI had to reorganize in the wake of this loss, but in spite of the difficulty of their situation they continued to produce high quality work.

While the study unfolded, the Regional Fire District Project took on another interested party. Avon Lake, a non-COG community, showed interest in joining in on our work. After contacting Bay Village Mayor Deborah Sutherland, they developed a plan to start a study of the potential benefits of Avon Lake joining our project after the Westshore study concluded.

After submitting a draft of the study during the winter of 2010, ESCI submitted its final study and recommendations in June of 2010. This report included seventy-five recommendations for individual communities and the whole group. ESCI recommended that we implement as many collaborative opportunities as quickly as possible. They noted that long-term success would depend on short-term evidence of improvements, though. They also provided four different approaches available to Westshore COG and its member communities:

“Autonomy:” The fire districts for each of our partners can continue to operate as separate departments. This strategy continues the status quo.

“Functional Consolidation:” Governmental entities may enter interlocal (intergovernmental) service agreements (ILAs) to cooperate or contract for any lawful purpose. This allows governments to *functionally* join in performing such activities as purchasing, public education, and apparatus maintenance, thus allowing agencies to accomplish cooperative goals without dealing with operational agreements or mergers. Most commonly, such agreements between fire departments are for tasks such as firefighter training, fire prevention, closest force response, and administrative/support services. Many of ESCI's recommendations for regional partnerships outlined opportunities for functional unification, which tend to be low-cost and low-risk improvement strategies. These activities often help build the trust and experience needed to eventually implement more complete consolidation strategies.

“Operational Consolidation:” Operational consolidation consists of joining “two or more entities, in their entirety, through an ILA.” This would allow for one “organizational structure and chain of command” for the whole of the district. This kind of body would be unique in many ways, some advantageous and others not. On the one hand, our existing governing boards would be maintained, and our district's operational managers would report to each of these boards, often through an oversight board. This would allow governing boards to have more say in the outcome, but it also creates a complex arrangement with potentially conflicting directions that might limit the ability of the operational managers to respond to change.

“Legal Unification:” This is the complete unification approach, whereby “under certain circumstances in law, fire departments can join into a single entity.” This formal approach not only unites our programs, but also unites our fire department organizations themselves. Governance and tax issues may vary by state or legal definitions, but ultimately the “legal process results in one unified agency.”

“[Westshore] has successfully mitigated five potential roadblocks- turf, power, politics, control, money- by getting the proper people together and systematically going through each of these issues with the appropriate decision makers and stakeholders that are involved.”

**Phil Kouwe
ESCI Researcher**

Obstacles and challenges are to be expected as our communities choose which of these paths to take, and as we merge the services of existing fire and emergency systems. Our leaders also realize that a number of problems are common to such endeavors, and must be recognized and addressed so that they are not allowed to “fester, grow, and possibly even ruin a collaborative effort” (Westshore EGN proposal, p. 6). These obstacles include fear of change; politics; and power and control. The latter obstacle includes questions related to who is in charge, what are the roles of the seven current fire chiefs, and how a union might fit in. These kinds of questions, which have always been in the background, must now be confronted as we move forward. In the words of Phil Kouwe of ESCI, “[Westshore] has successfully mitigated five potential roadblocks -- turf, power, politics, control, money -- by getting the proper people together and systematically going through each of these issues with the appropriate decision makers and stakeholders that are involved.”

Throughout our history, the “spirit” of the Westshore COG has been one of collaboration and cooperation. At meetings hosted by ESCI to gather public opinions, there were Mayors and Fire Chiefs from each of our communities present – often outnumbering the citizens who showed up. These local officials have shown solidarity in this project, and it appears as though they will need to maintain this positive approach as they take on the important and complex challenges that still confront them.

The Outcomes

By Summer 2010, we began to review the ESCI report and evaluate how to proceed. After extensive consideration, we began our strategic planning process for implementation of recommendations in May of 2011. Given the continuum of recommendations outlined above, our first task was identification of goals and objectives. Once we identified these priorities, we began meeting monthly in June 2011, and formally created a joint implementation committee, as well as work groups for labor, operations, governance, finance, and legal.

One of the most readily accessible options for collaboration was fire training. We immediately set about implementing some important changes to training, by creating a training calendar, centralizing the training processes, and developing a trainer orientation process. Our communities are now covering one another’s stations during training. Over time, we will cut our costs, while increasing the amount of training time available for participants. We have also begun to track equipment. Our next step in this process is to record equipment resources. Our Finance Director has also finished an analysis on how different communities fund their fire departments. Our joint implementation committee is trying to identify what form of funding and designation will be best, be it a fire authority, or a fire district. Each of these changes offers another opportunity for us to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our fire services.

We are currently in the process of discussing consolidation as well. While some communities do want to consolidate, others are concerned about local identity. Because of this difference in motives and goals, we have determined that consolidation does not have to include all communities. We have also determined that not everything needs to be perfectly aligned before one or more of the recommendations of the study can be implemented. Because of this, we have chosen to pursue individual recommendations while simultaneously pursuing full consolidation among some communities.

The EGN grant offered a significant cost savings for our partners. Throughout the process, the necessary contributions of our partners actually decreased, due to costs that proved to be lower than anticipated. While the actual cost savings offered by this project will be lower than the original \$1.3 million annual savings we projected in our proposal, the ESCI study found that we could still save about \$600,000 annually, with a 10 year projected savings of roughly \$6 million dollars if we fully consolidated our fire departments. While this is less than 5% of our overall costs, it suggests that significant savings may well be possible over time.

The Lessons

While this project still has some distance to go before it is completed, some lessons are emerging. Mayor Sutherland of Bay Village, the project leader, identified several lessons and observations gleaned from the process thus far: She said the process of rating responding consulting firms in the request for proposals was handled professionally by Chief Maraz in Lakewood. His effort to maintain openness and constant communication among all parties during the process set an appropriate tone for the project.

Mayor Sutherland also emphasized that our group as a whole maintained focus on the end result. She pointed out that one of the reasons that the process to date has worked well is that the consulting firm is experienced, internationally-recognized, and has a wealth of real-world knowledge.

And finally, Mayor Sutherland pointed to the value of external funding. The EGN grant, she said, played a major role in keeping our group motivated and enabled us to move forward in a timely manner. Without EGN grant, she said, the study would have taken several more years as we tried to raise the revenue to cover the costs of the consultation.

Mayor Sutherland emphasized that this type of project must be inclusive and open from the beginning. If the conversation starts with Mayors, potential collaborators have to include each and every level of personnel that will be affected by the change and a better result will be achieved. By “leaving egos at the door,” it will be easier to discuss the collaboration and what is best for the group as a whole.

For More Information...

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