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Report finds consolidated North Shore Fire Department has produced substantial savings and better service

A report released today by the Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum finds that 20 years after creation of a consolidated fire department, residents of Milwaukee County's North Shore are benefiting from improved service levels and lower costs.

“Our review of the impacts of fire department consolidation in Milwaukee County's North Shore shows that each of the seven municipalities likely is spending less today on fire and rescue services than it would have if consolidation had not occurred, assuming that each desired the same high level of service” says the report. “While the specific financial and operational benefits differ for each community, our analysis also shows that across the North Shore as a whole, considerably fewer resources are being spent to achieve a superior level of service, thus achieving a primary objective of functional consolidation.”

The report explores both the operations and finances of the North Shore Fire Department (NSFD), and considers what fire and emergency medical services (EMS) in the North Shore might look like and cost today if consolidation had never happened. In addition to providing a framework to assess the department's success on the 20th anniversary of its creation, the analysis is intended to provide insight into the merits of possible replication in other regions.

The report notes that fewer resources are deployed by the NSFD today when compared to the seven municipal fire departments in the North Shore 20 years ago. For example, the number of fire stations has been reduced from seven to five, and the number of vehicles housed in those stations from 31 to 15. Personnel levels also have been reduced, though the NSFD's full-time, professional firefighting force contrasts with the extensive use of public safety officers (police officers who also had firefighting duties) and paid-on-call firefighters prior to consolidation. Today's NSFD also has 33 firefighters who are trained paramedics, as compared to 12 in the North Shore in 1994.

“Overall, we observe that despite deploying fewer resources today, the NSFD is providing a higher level of service,” says the report. “Not only is the department's capacity to provide Advanced Life Support service far more advanced in light of its greater number of paramedics, but it also has achieved a substantially higher ‘ISO’ rating for its firefighting capability than any of the individual departments maintained prior to consolidation.”

The report also contains a detailed analysis of the financial impacts of fire department consolidation in the North Shore. That analysis yields the following insights:

- Four of the seven North Shore municipalities currently are paying less to the NSFD for fire and EMS services than they would have paid if consolidation had not occurred and their 1993 expenditures simply had increased at the rate of inflation. Collectively, the savings are nearly \$1.1 million annually.
- When expenditure amounts were adjusted to also reflect a level of service for each municipality that is associated with a full-time, fully professional fire department, the analysis found that *each* of the North Shore municipalities is experiencing operating savings, and that for five of the seven, the savings are exceeding \$250,000 annually. The analysis estimates that collectively, the North Shore municipalities would be paying about \$2.8 million more annually for an equivalent level of service had they not consolidated.

- On the capital side, the report projects that if each municipality had replaced vehicles owned prior to consolidation with new vehicles per existing replacement schedules, then collectively they would have spent up to \$3.4 million more than the NSFD actually spent on vehicle purchases in the 20 years following consolidation. Savings for individual municipalities ranged from \$199,000 for Whitefish Bay to \$739,000 for Bayside.

“These findings and observations prompt us to wonder why – given the apparent benefits that resulted from North Shore fire consolidation – we have not seen a greater impetus for consolidation of other functions in the North Shore, such as police departments and school districts,” concludes the report. “A related question is why there has not been greater movement to consolidate fire and rescue services in other parts of Milwaukee County and the larger southeast Wisconsin region.”

The full report – which was commissioned by the North Shore Fire/Rescue Foundation – can be downloaded at the Forum’s web site, www.publicpolicyforum.org.

Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum, established in 1913 as a local government watchdog, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness of government and the development of southeastern Wisconsin through objective research of public policy issues.

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