

## Analysis

# Potential Fire Collaboration Western Washtenaw Area

Officials from the six western Washtenaw County townships of Dexter, Lima, Lyndon, Sylvan, Scio and Webster townships and the communities of Chelsea and Dexter are considering alternative collaborative opportunities for fire services. Assistance has been requested from the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) to facilitate the discussions, analyze the current fire arrangements and provide potential collaborative approaches, specifically the feasibility of a single fire authority for the entire region.

This report provides a summary of the initial findings of the analysis based on the work of SEMCOG consultant Dave Boerger. The preliminary results yielded several technically feasible approaches for collaborative fire services in the region, each of which will be described later in this analysis. The key factors in the study included population/household/demographic trends, fire call volumes, apparatus conditions station locality, benchmark comparisons and funding strategies.

Currently, three separate authorities provide fire services to the 8 western Washtenaw local governments, as indicated on the map shown in Attachment I and service comparison data provided in Attachment II. The three existing authorities include:

- Scio Township Fire Department (STFD)
- Dexter Area Fire Department (DAFD) covering the village of Dexter, the entire Webster Township and the eastern portion of Lima and Dexter Townships
- Chelsea Area Fire Authority (CAFA) providing fire services for the city of Chelsea, Sylvan and Lyndon Townships and the western section of Lima and Dexter Townships.

Mutual aid agreements exist among all three authorities. Each of the fire authorities are funded in conventional ways, based on general fund contributions, differing millage rates and various service fee structures.

For any collaborative alternative to be viable, compelling reasons are needed to justify the upfront efforts associated with a major joint program. Therefore, creating a single fire authority for all eight local governments would have to dramatically improve service to the citizens of the region while offering those services at benchmark cost levels. Further complicating the process are the requirements of Michigan Public Act 57 of 1988, legislation that provides for the incorporation by 2 or more municipalities of certain authorities for the purpose of providing emergency services. The most critical requirement of this legislation is a "hold harmless" clause guaranteeing certain labor contracts and employment rights in regard to the formation and reorganization of authorities. Plus any joint program would have to be politically acceptable as well, since approvals initially by all the elected officials and subsequently by all the citizens from the eight local governments within the western Washtenaw County region would be required.

The potential collaborative alternatives that were identified by SEMCOG as a result of the initial analysis are each described below:

1. Region-wide Fire Authority funded at current millage rates & fee structures – Maintaining the current funding structure, but under a Fire Authority allows structural efficiencies that can be used to fund staff for any existing or new stations that would be constructed and funded by the local government where the station is located. This funding alternative means the fire costs for all the local governments would be unchanged from current levels resulting from the recent CAFA and STFD millage approvals.
2. Region-wide Fire Authority funded at 1.2 mils – This scenario assumes a common millage rate for the entire region that generates the same income as current (after the CAFA and STFD millage approvals), with structural efficiencies described later used to fund incremental staff for any existing or new stations that would be constructed and funded by the local government where the station is located. This common millage rate alternative means the fire costs for some local governments would increase while others would decrease from current levels.
3. Region-wide Fire Authority funded at 1.5 mils – This scenario assumes a common millage rate for the entire region that would generate incremental revenues and structural efficiencies to fund substantial service improvements including staffing for advance life support EMS capability and any existing or new stations that would be constructed and funded by the local government where the station is located.
4. Region-wide Fire Authority funded at 1.8 mils – Based on the successful approval by the electorate for a 1.8 millage rate to fund the CAFA fire authority, pursuing similar action for the entire 6 township and 2 community region could be considered. For example, should such an authority be structured like other similar authorities across the state, most notably the North Oakland County Fire Authority ([www.nocfa.org](http://www.nocfa.org)), adequate funding would be generated to provide for the costs of needed stations, equipment and personnel, including advanced life support EMS capability. Under such a scenario, response times and service levels would be dramatically enhanced across the entire region. This millage rate alternative means the fire costs for some local governments would increase while others would remain unchanged from current levels.

Supporting data for each of the above alternatives has been summarized on Attachment III, which provides demographic trends for each community as well as comparable benchmarks from other authorities across SE Michigan. The data demonstrates how creating a region-wide fire authority can concurrently provide service enhancements and efficiencies that improve the overall effectiveness and value of the delivered services to benchmark levels. With an integrated fire authority, synergies and efficiencies can be implemented such as a leaner organization structure, higher volume/lower cost purchases, less overhead costs, common work practices, shift pattern optimization, leaner staffing, mutual aid enhancements, cross training and best practice sharing, which will fund service enhancements, added operational staff and/or capital expenditures. Creating a region-wide authority if executed effectively, including

the above efficiencies, will theoretically drive costs to benchmark levels, which would mean potential savings of 20% as measured by cost per household serviced.

During the course of the research for this analysis, SEMCOG discovered an existing fire authority that provides an excellent model to replicate if an integrated authority is pursued. The North Oakland County Fire Authority provides fire and advanced life support EMS service through 2 existing stations in Rose and Holly Townships, plus one new station under construction and funded within the existing 1.7 millage rate. NOCFA Chief Lintz offered to provide help and information on their authority should a western Washtenaw County fire authority gain momentum.

The most critical and immediate service enhancement needed for the region is to provide staffing for stations in Dexter and Webster townships, so service and response times can be improved in those areas to the levels in place for the rest of the region. The efficiencies and potential revenue enhancements from forming an authority should be first applied to staffing for those stations.

After considering the information and data provided in this analysis, if the western Washtenaw County local governments are interested in considering a region-wide fire authority, SEMCOG would be pleased to work with local officials if the integrated fire authority approach is pursued. Since such a proposal is a rather complex collaborative venture, having an independent entity like SEMCOG facilitate the process can accelerate timely resolution of issues and successful implementation. The cost for such service is free to SEMCOG members; however, Dexter, Lyndon, Sylvan and Webster townships are not members. Annual membership fees are based upon population, with Dexter and Webster townships at \$1350 and Lyndon and Sylvan at \$850. Contact SEMCOG's Amy Malmer ([Malmer@semcog.org](mailto:Malmer@semcog.org) or 313-324-3308) for more information on membership. And please feel free to contact the author for more information on the contents of this analysis.

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