

New Stations, Joint Aid Proposed

A consultant hired by North Wilkesboro and Wilkesboro discussed how the two town fire departments could work together better but didn't address a merger until asked during a retreat Thursday at Oakwoods Country Club.

Well into the 8½-hour meeting of the two elected governing bodies, Wilkesboro Councilman Russ Ferree asked consultant Steve Allen of Charlotte if he saw any benefits of merging the Wilkesboro and North Wilkesboro fire districts. This would be the same as merging the fire departments.

Pausing a few seconds to think before answering, Allen said, "From a management perspective and a sharing of resources, that wouldn't change the map at all right now."

Merging or not, he said, local officials need to consider building a fire station to have faster emergency response times in the U.S. 421 West and N.C. 268 West areas of Wilkesboro and a fire station to do the same for the N.C. 18 North, River Road/Liberty Grove Road, Highland Park and Canterbury Estates areas of North Wilkesboro.

Allen said it took more than four minutes for firefighters to reach these areas and they're all more than two miles from fire stations in their towns. He said the National Fire Protection Association recommended the four-minute and two-mile limits and state fire marshal's office data suggested this.

Allen said merging the two fire departments would insure consistency in response and on-site procedures and other policies, plus firefighting vehicles could be distributed more efficiently.

"But there would be some growing pains.... My tendency is to say walk together before you run, so to speak. Get mutual aid going" between the two departments. Merging them now would be too sudden and too much of a shock, said Allen.

"Let them maintain their identity and the words on their shirts for a while longer while they're working through this mutual aid thing. Let that be the catalyst for some of these other things, the joint purchases and training opportunities." He said joint efforts of the two departments could improve chances for grants.

"Those kinds of things now can develop that bond that will make the transition when the time comes. As you (Ferree) mentioned earlier today when I first walked in, at some point in time, whether it's in your lifetime or not, you're going to be one town." He said this usually start with mergers of certain municipal departments.

Approving a written mutual aid agreement between the Wilkesboro and North Wilkesboro fire departments and building a fire station to serve western Wilkesboro and another one to serve the identified parts of North Wilkesboro are among several recommendations in Allen's 33-page report, which resulted from his study of fire department records and interviews with firefighters.

Allen said having an automatic mutual aid agreement (contract) means the Wilkesboro Fire Department would automatically be dispatched to help North Wilkesboro firefighters with structure fires in the North Wilkesboro district and vice-versa.

North Wilkesboro commissioners Joe Johnston and Debbie Ferguson and Town Manager Larry South said they were surprised to learn that there wasn't a written mutual aid agreement between the Wilkesboro and North Wilkesboro fire departments.

He said written mutual aid agreements are standard operating procedure across the state. Out of over 100 fire departments he has worked with across North Carolina, Wilkesboro and North Wilkesboro are the first he has seen without mutual aid agreements.

Wilkesboro councilman Mike Testerman, former Wilkesboro fire chief, and Wilkesboro Town Manager Ken Noland said the two departments already assist each other when called even though they don't have a written agreement.

“We discussed having automatic mutual aid, but we thought the impact on traffic in both towns would prove to be more a hazard than a help because 90 percent of our calls are false alarms,” said Testerman, explaining that the response can include numerous volunteer firefighters in their individual private vehicles.

It was stated in the meeting that the mutual aid agreement could be automatic or not. If automatic, the assisting fire department would automatically be dispatched simultaneously with the primary department.

Volunteer fire departments outside the Wilkesboros already have mutual aid agreements with each other.

Noland said the agreement could be structured so that the assisting department would provide only a certain amount of equipment and firefighters.

South said a fire department en route to assist under an automatic mutual aid agreement could be told by radio to cancel its response if assistance isn't needed.

Johnston said it's important to make sure at least four firefighters are available to respond to a fire based on the state fire marshal's office requiring that a least one fire engine with four firefighters respond to each reported structure fire. Noland agreed and said one paid North Wilkesboro firefighter could be waiting for three volunteer North Wilkesboro firefighters to arrive at the North Wilkesboro Fire Station when an alarm goes off, while fulltime Wilkesboro firefighters continue sleeping at their station because they weren't dispatched to provide mutual aid.

“We may be missing the boat there,” he said. “We're already paying these guys and you've got guys you're paying. So we've got people sitting in these buildings who may not be utilized to their full extent.”

North Wilkesboro Commissioner Bart Hayes said it concerned him when he learned from Allen that North Wilkesboro and Wilkesboro firefighters aren't being trained together and not at the same places.

Allen also recommended that:

- town officials compare costs of hiring additional fulltime firefighters to reduce response times to costs of building second fire stations. He said the impact of automatic mutual aid agreements between the two towns and with volunteer fire departments on response times should be considered;
- North Wilkesboro provide funds to have a fulltime chief instead of continuing with a part-time chief. He also recommended that North Wilkesboro provide funding for at least three firefighter/EMT positions, in addition to the three existing fulltime firefighters, to assure the required response of one fire engine and four firefighters 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Allen said the firefighter/EMT positions could be on a fulltime, part-time or scheduled paid per-call basis. Wilkesboro already has a fulltime chief and three fulltime firefighters;
- Wilkesboro sell its 1978 American LaFrance aerial/ladder truck, North Wilkesboro replace or upfit its 1988 Grumman aerial/ladder unit and its 2001 Ford mini-pumper;
- both fire departments track interval and total response times separately by type of call (fire or medical) to determine if different deployment methods are needed for either.

Wilkesboro Mayor Mike Inscore said he agreed with Allen that the two town fire chiefs should regularly meet and plan for better preparedness. He said those interactions now don't consistently occur.

Allen said there is a lack of planning for emergencies at specific locations. “If the hospital second floor blows out or if Tyson catches fire, who is going to do, what and where. Good fire departments do emergency response planning,” he said.

Allen said he was made aware of competition between the two fire departments and quipped about an over-abundance of testosterone. His report said the two departments have the same objectives, but differing philosophies, operating and response procedures, scheduling and use of volunteers, salaries and wages, continuing education and training requirements and other differences.

Wilkesboro and North Wilkesboro officials must consider collaboration on fire protection because they're attached and not just neighboring towns. Failure to do so could easily increase firefighting costs and emergency response times and reduce effectiveness, the report said.

Allen said the two town fire departments "need to set the bar and be the go-to guys (among fire departments in Wilkes) for knowledge and capabilities."

It said North Wilkesboro's demographics soon wouldn't sustain enough volunteer fire firefighters, if it doesn't already. He said volunteers could no longer be members of two fire departments.

Hayes said North Wilkesboro already has difficulty finding enough volunteer firefighters and said most live outside of town. Inscore said there's a shortage of volunteer firefighters nationwide.

Officials of the two towns agreed to seek input on Allen's recommendations from Wilkesboro and North Wilkesboro firefighters and have them reviewed by a committee consisting of Ferree, Testerman, Bart Hayes, Hall, Noland, South, Wilkesboro Fire Chief Jason Smithey, North Wilkesboro Interim Fire Chief Jimmy Martin, Gary Brown (former Wilkesboro firefighter) and Edgar Harris (former fire chief of both departments).

With this additional input, the recommendations are to be presented to the governing bodies of the two towns. The two governing bodies earlier agreed to split the cost of having the study conducted by Allen, whose company is Solutions 4 Local Government. They agreed on a maximum cost of \$25,740.