

**From:** Mark Fontaine [<mailto:MFontaine@renaudconsulting.net>]

**Sent:** Monday, November 12, 2012 2:14 PM

**To:** Clarke, Janet

**Subject:** As Volunteers see it....

Janet,

Please consider passing this on to the Reform Committee.

Respectfully,

***Mark J. Fontaine, President***

***LCFR Comissioner***

Purcellville Volunteer Fire Department

PO Box 386

Purcellville VA 20134

Station: 540-338-5961

**Cell:703-431-6938**

**[MFontaine@Purcellvillefire.org](mailto:MFontaine@Purcellvillefire.org)**

**[www.Purcellvillefire.org](http://www.Purcellvillefire.org)**

## **Loudoun County's Combined Volunteer/Career Fire and Rescue System**

### **Issues and Observations from the Volunteer Perspective**

The following is a summary of issues and concerns regarding the relationship (operationally and administratively) between the volunteer cadre of fire companies in Loudoun County and the career fire, rescue and emergency services department. This perspective is from the point of view of the volunteers who currently serve and represents perceptions colored by that unique combination of demands made of them who do their training, emergency response service, administrative work, public education activities, facility maintenance and management, fund raising, community relations and much more in their 'free time' in addition to family, job and personal responsibilities and commitments. Input was provided by various operational and administrative leaders throughout the system.

#### **Overview Issues**

- Lack of appreciation for the work being done by volunteers in the County in the form of tangible benefits that derive to the companies themselves – governmental and public focus is on the work of the career department.
- Few tangible benefits for volunteers as demands for more training and commitments grow. (While none volunteer with the intent to secure benefits, \$10 gift cards for hundreds of hours of service, or having the privilege to join the County's health insurance plan at over \$4,000 per MONTH for a family, hardly classify as benefits).
- Lack of financial support for volunteer companies who are in competition **with each other** for the limited dollars the County provides in its annual budget dedicated to the volunteer units.
- A broken disbursement process which is based on an allocation algorithm developed decades ago and does not reflect changed circumstances or the realities now facing viable volunteer companies. (The County adjusts real estate valuations each year, why not this allocation calculus?)

- Lack of public understanding of the millions of dollars a year the volunteer cadre saves the County in salaries and benefits, equipment purchases and facility support. Our taxpayer base assumes that the career department is the entity which provides them services and for which they pay taxes to support. Why support anybody else?
- Lack of effective administrative capability (staffing and systems support) to support the initiatives and activities necessary to address the recruitment and retention needs of volunteers.
- The key administrative representative of the volunteer voice in the County is a career department employee.
- Poor administrative systems which consistently turn out reports based in different calendar, fiscal or administrative cycles, or that are simply limited in their ability to produce information necessary to evaluate program effectiveness.
- Lack of clarity regarding the proper definition of relationship between County oversight and management of the combined system and the autonomous nature of most volunteer companies with respect to their charters and freedom of operation.
- Lack of a well understood plan for annual volunteer activities for the system. (Separate from the DFRES plan.)
- Seeming disinterest at the County administrative level to tap the wide array of business, marketing, educational and other talents inherent in the professional experience of volunteers or members of the community to assist with strategic planning and tactical activity early on in policy development, especially as it relates to understanding geo-demographic trends within the county and the impact on recruitment and retention.

#### **Issues Associated with the Current Administrative Apparatus - Fire Commission, Fire and EMS Councils**

- A Fire Commission, that despite conducting public meetings, operates more akin to a 'star chamber' with decision-making, agenda development, discussion, and 'real decisions' being made by one or a very few individuals outside the glare of public scrutiny.
- Seeming dominance on policy decisions on the Commission and the Councils by EMS representatives and those from the east end of the country.
- Lack of a term limits on a Council, Committee and Commission Chairperson.

- Fire and EMS Councils that appear to operate in distinct silos and which are often in conflict over policies and practices, over which the Fire Commission exercises limited or no effective leadership or guidance (or at least that which is apparent to most volunteers).
- New policies and practices (FRGs), whether they originate with one or more of the Councils, or from the career department itself, are reviewed and adopted and immediately implemented often without a full understanding of *potential unanticipated negative impacts on volunteer operations*, recruitment and retention.
- Operational “guidelines” which are inconsistently applied across sectors of volunteer membership and that are poorly managed create significant difficulties for companies struggling to recruit and maintain operational membership. The adoption of good policies and practices (regarding health and welfare or high training standards) is **not** at issue here: **the implementation, administration and management of the policies are the problems**. The effect is that the system appears to be unfriendly to volunteers.

### **Issues Associated with the Current Administrative Apparatus - Recruitment and Retention Committee**

The main volunteer company voice for recruitment and retention matters is the Recruitment and Retention Committee. It has been ineffective at securing responses to a series of requests for information, data and follow-up on surveys, pilot programs and consultant reports in a timely and effective fashion. Specific issues are summarized below:

#### **Communications**

- No (or infrequent) dissemination of agendas in advance of meetings
- Minutes or records of meetings intermittent or non-existent
- Issues requiring discussion often occur in meetings with no advance time to review or consider, or after some other entity has pre-determined outcomes (Fire or EMS Council)
- Poor dissemination of information on follow-up on programmatic activities -- consultants reports, outreach efforts

#### **Policy Formulation and/or Follow-up**

- Policies being formulated by other entities ‘get to’ the R&R committee late or not at all (Training FRGs, County Allocation)
- Policies and procedures for which the Committee is responsible often exhibit poor information dissemination and execution (NFPA 1582 physical)
- Requests for rushed responses to key issues requiring thoughtful and measured responses (requests for volunteer company input on surveys, consultant needs, draft reports, etc.)

- Inability to focus effort/resources where there are established (and different) needs (western v. eastern parts of the County, fire needs versus EMS needs) and evaluation of current initiatives relative to those distinctly separate needs
- Lack of a well understood plan for annual volunteer activities for the system.
- Lack of differentiation between strategic planning and tactical planning

#### **Status of R&R in the LCFR Hierarchy of Volunteer Committees**

- Poor understanding of the relationship between and among the various Councils, the Commission and this committee. Members are often told to attend the Fire Commission meeting as individuals in order to press their interests. Why attend R&R committee meetings if that is the way to register influence. (See Fire Commission over re: meetings)
- When R&R status *is* recognized by other entities it is often offered too late to influence the process (training FRG, 1582)

#### **Support (technical, human and volunteer)**

- Inability to run statistical reports on measures that mean the most to recruitment and retention problems (yield information on inquires by fire ops, fire admin, EMS ops and EMS admin)
- Inaccurate reports
- Wasted volunteer time auditing company books for the County's retirement and LOSP system
- Lack of responsiveness to agreed upon actions or committee requests
- Inconsistent 'yearly cycles' (fiscal ,versus 'points years,' versus calendar year) for key reporting
- Inability to evaluate effectiveness of recruitment and retention initiatives against goals
- Poor attendance at monthly meetings
- EMS dominance in discussions and leadership

## In Conclusion

There is a general sense among many volunteers, most acutely felt in the western end of the County, that the combined fire and rescue system is on a path to becoming what Fairfax County has become – a system almost totally dominated by a career system. While the failure of some of the west end companies to reverse the decline in numbers of volunteer members is partly to blame for creating an environment that requires some other entity to step in, actions (or inactions) of the County have led to an acceleration, not a reversal, of those fortunes. Volunteers are suspicious of the intentions of the County and the career department with respect to their professing support for a viable combined system when they take action, sometimes with the unwitting support of volunteers themselves, which actually hastens the failure of the volunteer system they claim to support.

Some would say that unless the actions of the County and the career department can be redirected to be more effective at meeting the demonstrated needs of volunteers, *as volunteers see it*, such a march to a total loss of volunteer service Loudoun County is inevitable.

While the County has made some progress in providing direct assistance to volunteer companies (SCBA program, apparatus purchase assistance) there is much more that can be done short of needing to take over the entire workload of volunteers (salaries, benefits and concomitant operating expense) that would be far less expensive to the County and of significant assistance to volunteers (assistance with building management expenses, PPE purchases, etc.). The simple act of taking on one or another of these obligations would demonstrate a true commitment to a viable combined fire and rescue system.