

Consolidated local service will benefit taxpayers, OUR VIEW

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Now, for the hard part.

Volusia County recently completed a smooth transition to a consolidated emergency dispatch system. With the change, county government is handling all 9-1-1 calls, creating a seamless process that should benefit patients and, ultimately, the taxpayers. The county also is officially in the ambulance business, having taken over EVAC, formerly a nonprofit entity, last week.

County leaders think everyone will like the unified dispatch system, which will save Volusia County's cities a combined total of about \$6 million annually. The new system also will save precious time in an emergency by eliminating the need to transfer 9-1-1 calls to different agencies.

County officials hope consolidated dispatch and a county ambulance service will set the table for at least a partial consolidation of fire services. That's where the really big savings can be found.

But creating a countywide fire department is a far more contentious issue than unifying emergency dispatch. Despite the political difficulties, county officials continue to pursue the long-sought goal of fire consolidation. Local taxpayers have at least 5.7 million reasons to support their quest.

Volusia County has 13 separate fire departments with a total of 59 fire stations. Seven of the 12 municipal departments cover a relatively narrow slice of the county stretching from Ormond Beach to Ponce Inlet.

Geography alone indicates that a countywide fire department has the potential to reduce duplication of services and save on personnel costs. A study commissioned last year by the **Halifax Area Civic League** found that taxpayers in Volusia County would benefit from fire consolidation, to the tune of \$5.7 million in estimated annual savings.

According to the study, the cost of providing fire and rescue services in the county skyrocketed from \$43.8 million in 2002 to \$85 million in 2010. That 93 percent increase for the eight-year period was more than 11 times greater than the increase in the county's population.

Elected officials need to examine these soaring costs and determine whether they can effectively provide this critical service at a lower cost to the taxpayers. Americans are demanding that all levels of government keep spending under control. Volusia County taxpayers should expect their local leaders to rein in fire service costs that are rising by more than 10 percent a year.

The rising cost of public employee pensions should be part of the consolidation debate. The civic league report noted that Volusia County cities carry a combined unfunded pension liability of \$59 million -- \$38 million of that total is carried by Daytona Beach and Port Orange.

Fire department consolidation could provide some relief from rapidly rising pension costs. Municipal leaders need to be thinking about how they will deal with pension costs that are unsustainable over the long haul.

The civic league's conservative estimate of \$5.7 million in savings from fire department consolidation should spur the municipalities to look beyond parochial concerns and consider the overall best interest of taxpayers in Volusia County.

"This is just the beginning," County Chair Frank Bruno said, referring to the county's moves on emergency dispatch and EVAC. "This will help us working with the cities on additional unification of services."

Taxpayers should hope it's the dawn of a new era of more rational and efficient delivery of key local services.