



CITY OF KIRKLAND

Fire & Building Department

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MEMORANDUM

To: Dave Ramsay, City Manager

From: Jeff Blake, Fire Chief

Date: September 17, 2008

Subject: Regional Fire Authority Concept – White Paper

The idea of becoming a part of a Regional Fire Authority (RFA) or merging organizations has been talked about for several years; each time the outcome has been to not pursue the idea further. A regional fire authority has both advantages and disadvantages which must be weighed in order to insure an RFA or merger would be right for Kirkland's citizens. An RFA for Kirkland does not appear to be a good venture for our city; the costs of running a fire department could go down with the economies of scale of an RFA, however, the taxes to support the fire department would be on top of what is already being paid by our citizens because the RFA has separate taxing authority. The only way to avoid this higher taxation is to reduce taxes and/or fees in an equal amount of running the RFA. In Kirkland's situation, the cost of running the fire and medical services for Kirkland by an RFA might be equal to or greater than the current property tax levy of Kirkland. So a combination of property tax and other fees would need to be reduced to have a neutral impact on citizens if creating a regional fire authority. Without a neutral impact on the citizens, there is likely not a compelling reason for citizens to vote yes for joining a regional fire authority. Without reducing the tax/fees the same service levels for a significant cost increase would likely be a fatal flaw in trying to pursue an RFA.

However, the City of Auburn fire department became a part of a regional fire authority and the city did not reduce the property tax levy. They identified how they would reallocate the revenues to other services and voters approved the regional fire authority. So if Kirkland were to take the same approach, and find acceptable services to reallocate revenues, voters might approve our participation in a regional fire authority, as well. If there is interest in knowing more about how and what the City of Auburn did in their process, staff could be directed to explore the details.

The following is from the ***Regional Fire Authority Implementation Guide for Fire Departments in Washington State, jointly developed by the Washington State Fire Chiefs and Washington State Council of Firefighters.***

Section: Fire Authority Development Process

The first step in the process to determine if the regional fire authority (RFA) is right for you is to ask the following questions:

- *Are we considering an RFA for the benefit of our citizens?*
- *Are we considering an RFA to gain efficiencies for the benefit of our citizens?*
- *Are we considering an RFA to improve the overall level of service, standards of cover, and enhance services for the benefit of our citizens?*

*If the answer to these simple questions is **yes**, then an RFA might be a strong consideration for your department. However, if you are considering an RFA simply to try to save money, or due to a funding issue; or, if you are considering an RFA to eliminate issues between fire departments (such as issues between cities and fire districts), then the RFA probably is not the answer for you. The RFA should only be used if it can be determined that combining fire departments, or subsets of fire departments, can truly benefit the citizens that are being served. If it is not about the citizens, then don't do it. If it is...proceed forward!!!*

I included this section of the implementation guide to point out that we need to be thinking about a Regional Fire Authority for the right reasons for our citizens. As it states above, considering an RFA because of funding issues or simply to try and save money is not a reason to pursue a regional fire authority. I agree with this fully, and this does not seem to be the time for us to pursue a regional fire authority under our current financial conditions.

There are other options which could be considered if you can identify your objective in wanting to turnover your control or responsibility of the fire department. Some of the alternatives might include contracting with a fire district, another city or a regional fire authority, annexing into a fire district, or increasing the property tax levy.

I think we must first be clear as to why you want an alternative to operating a fire department. Is it to save money, gain efficiencies, or something else? Is it because there is a greater need for funding without a clear identified source? Or is it because there are alternatives which might be a better way to serve the citizens?

What I believe I have heard so far is that you are looking for the least expensive means of delivering emergency services. If you could compel voters to approve adding taxes for services under a regional fire authority, I think you could also do it with the same message or justification and not have to give up your control and responsibility for the fire department.

In looking to preserve and improve fire and medical services in our community it is prudent to evaluate all options which might be available. Considering if a regional fire authority is an option for our revenue and expenditure gap is a reasonable thing to ask; however it just isn't the right option for this situation. Other options should be evaluated for our current budget challenges; pursuing a regional fire authority could be considered when our financial outlook has improved. Defining exactly what you want to accomplish by looking at the alternatives is necessary before you can decide which option might be best for the citizens of Kirkland.