
Ashland- Hopkinton Fire Services Collaboration Interim Report

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Town of Ashland
Town of Hopkinton

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Prepared by
Metropolitan Area Planning Council
60 Temple Place, 6th Floor
Boston, Massachusetts 02111
Tel (617) 451-2770
www.mapc.org

Acknowledgements

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MAPC staff members involved in this project include:

Peter Dunn, Municipal Services Specialist
Stephen J. Daly, Director of Municipal Governance.

PROJECT ADVISORY GROUP

Hopkinton

Norman Khumalo	Town Manager
Brian Herr	Selectman
Ken Clark	Fire Chief
Kaz Piorkowski	Union President

Ashland

Anthony Schiavi	Town Manager
Yolanda Greaves	Selectman
William Kee	Fire Chief
David Iarussi	Union President

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Executive Summary

Building on a strong history of involvement with this effort, MAPC continued in 2013 to support the towns of Ashland and Hopkinton in planning for the consolidation of their fire departments. The goal of the current phase of the project, funded by a Community Innovation Challenge grant, is to develop a complete organizational model for the proposed department, then seek the communities' approval for the merger at Town Meeting. As project manager, MAPC has been instrumental in setting the direction of the project, planning and facilitating meetings, and coordinating the contributions of the project vendor and town participants. MAPC has also conducted a series of analyses that have informed the development of the plan, led the development of a proposed governance model, and directed the first presentations of the current version of the plan to outside audiences. Over the past year, the project team has made substantial progress on this long-running effort, and the towns are well-positioned to introduce Town Meeting votes on the merger proposal in 2014.

Chapter One: Background

The towns of Ashland and Hopkinton first began to formally explore the possibility of merging their fire departments in 2008, when the fire chiefs produced a white paper outlining the possible benefits of a merger. These departments already had a long history of working together, and they regularly depend on each other for support at major incidents. A merger would strengthen and formalize this collaboration by building on the close relationship that already exists. At the request of the town managers, MAPC facilitated three stages of feasibility study with District Local Technical Assistance funding. These studies analyzed the current operations, budgets, and assets of the departments identified the benefits that a merger could bring to the efficiency and effectiveness of fire, rescue, and emergency medical services in the two communities.

In 2012, the towns were awarded a \$175,000 Community Innovation Challenge Grant from the Executive Office of Administration and Finance. The purpose of the grant is to fully prepare the communities to make a decision on consolidating the fire departments at their annual Town Meetings. Unlike the previous feasibility studies, this project would develop a comprehensive vision for a single fire department serving both towns, then introduce that plan to the communities for their feedback and support. MAPC's role in this project was to serve as project manager and facilitator, while a technical consultant would be hired to provide outside expertise on fire service delivery.

The original plan for the grant-funded project called for the towns to bring the merger proposal to the Spring 2013 Town Meetings. However, in early 2013, the project advisory group made a decision to extend the project timeframe by one year, changing the Town Meeting target to 2014. (The project had been somewhat delayed in its early stages by leadership transitions in Ashland.) Although the funders at A&F agreed to an amendment to the contract to extend the timeframe, they could offer no additional funding. At the same time, project demands had required MAPC to take on a significant amount of project work beyond the original scope.

As a result of both the extended timeframe and the expanded scope, MAPC had expended its portion of the grant budget by July, with nearly a year left in the project timeline. In order to cover MAPC's continued involvement in the project through Town Meeting proposals, the project team sought additional funding from DLTA. The town managers agreed that MAPC's facilitation of the project was critical to its success, and MAPC's executive director allocated DLTA funds to support staff involvement through the remainder of the calendar year.

Chapter Two: Project Management Activities

At the outset of the project, MAPC facilitated the formation of an Advisory Group responsible for all project discussions and decisions. Its members included the town managers, fire chiefs, and union presidents of each town, ensuring that all stakeholders have a voice in the process. At the recommendation of the town managers, a representative from each town's Board of Selectmen was later added to the Advisory Group to ensure that the project team stayed connected to the community's elected representatives, and that the boards could be informed about project progress. MAPC drafted a set of ground rules to govern the operation of the Advisory Group, which all members agreed to.

As project manager, MAPC recommends a course of action for the effort to ensure that participants can meet deadlines, resolve issues, and bring together the right pieces at the appropriate time. This work is done in consultation with both town managers and with the grant funders. The project Advisory Group meets at least once per month, and sometimes as often as weekly. MAPC is responsible for setting the agendas for these meetings with the approval of the town managers. MAPC then ensures that materials are properly distributed to the Advisory Group members, and that requests for follow-up are completed. At the meetings, MAPC can play the role of facilitator as needed, using its position as an outside party to help neutralize any contentious issues that may arise.

MAPC's project management effort also involves coordinating the vendor's activities. The Advisory Group hired Municipal Resources, Inc. (MRI) at the start of the project develop an organizational framework for a merged department. MAPC helped to define these deliverables, then ensure that the vendor made sufficient progress against the project plan. MAPC also assisted MRI to translate various project documents into formats and language most appropriate for a given audience. Finally, MAPC has handled the contract management and invoice processing on behalf of the Town of Hopkinton, MRI's official client.

Similarly, MAPC manages the grant and ensures that the state funders have the reports and information they need to be satisfied with the project's progress. MAPC has filed quarterly reports, drafted contract amendments, and delivered various project updates as requested.

In addition, MAPC has been involved in a wide range of activities in support of the project that are not strictly project management, but have been essential to move the project forward. The most significant activity in this category has been the drafting of a proposed governance model for the merged department. Working together with the town managers, selectmen, and town counsels, MAPC presented a draft inter-municipal agreement that would allow for the two towns to jointly govern and fund a single fire department, while maintaining the local autonomy of their Town Meetings and Boards of Selectmen.

MAPC also has drawn on its internal resources and expertise to produce detailed maps and charts presenting analyses of current demand for the fire departments' services. To support decision-making around proposed staffing levels, MAPC developed a robust personnel cost model that can be customized to evaluate any number of staffing scenarios. Lastly, MAPC developed presentation materials for briefings to the firefighters and the Boards of Selectmen.

Chapter Three: Project Outcomes

This project will continue in 2014 as the Advisory Group continues to refine the proposal, then begins focused public engagement to prepare the communities for a decision on the merger at Town Meetings. If voters approve the plan, then a merged department could be operational as early as 2015. A merged department will enable emergency personnel to more efficiently and effectively respond to the demand for services as these communities continue to grow. In particular, the merger will put the departments in a much better position to respond when personnel have been dispatched to one incident and there is then a second call for service. In addition to providing for the more

efficient administration of the larger department, a merger will also save the towns millions of dollars in staffing costs compared to the costs of providing the same level of protection independently.

The Advisory Group saw several notable achievements in 2013. For the first time, the towns have identified an organizational framework for the proposed department that all Advisory Group members agree to. After evaluating a range of response staffing options, the group has decided to propose a department in which a duty group comprises two engine companies, a ladder company, and two staffed ambulances, all headed by a shift commander. This is a substantial improvement from the current staffing level, in which each town has a single engine company responsible for cross-staffing an ambulance or other fire apparatus as needed. In addition, the merger proposal includes a full complement of administrative personnel, who will be better able to meet the demands of the new department without any increase in current administrative headcount by more efficiently dividing labor to match skillsets.

The completion of a draft governance model represents another major hurdle cleared. This model, which has preliminary support from the key stakeholders in each town, is built around a five-member joint board whose powers are delegated by the towns. Each town would be represented by its town manager and one selectmen. The fifth member, the board's chair, would be an individual nominated by the town managers and confirmed by both boards of selectmen. The board would be responsible for all policy-making and oversight, and would also hire and oversee a fire chief. As a "strong chief," this individual would have full authority over the day-to-day operations of the department and the management of personnel. The joint board will propose a departmental budget, which will then be adopted by each of the two Town Meetings. The agreement also contains provisions for the dissolution of the entity.

The Advisory Group also made progress in examining current department budgets and drafting a proposed merged budget. These efforts covered three main categories: capital expenses, personnel costs, and other operating costs. In addition, the group has taken a close look at projected revenues from building inspections, emergency medical services, and other sources. These budgets will serve as a reference when proposing the plan to selectmen and to the public, but the final, detailed budgets will not be developed, proposed, and adopted until after the towns have voted to implement the merger.

Finally, the Advisory Group was pleased to present this vision and the work behind it in two major briefings. On September 26, the group briefed a joint meeting of the Ashland and Hopkinton fire unions, and on October 30, the group briefed a joint meeting of the towns' Boards of Selectmen. Each of these briefings led to discussion and feedback that raised specific questions and concerns for the Advisory Group to address, while confirming that they were on the right track. These meetings are a positive first step in the larger public engagement phase of the project, which MAPC is looking forward to supporting in 2014.