

Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue (SRFR)

Response #1 of 2:

Disclaimer: I am a Commissioner with the former District 7. District 7 was the larger district involved with both of our mergers with District 3 (Monroe) and District 8 (Lake Stevens). My input will likely be bias in that direction. Be aware that all merger impacts don't just fall on or effect the smaller partner. There are positive and challenging impacts for the larger partner as well.

1. Did you merge with another Fire Department for contract for services?

We merged twice in 4 years.

2. What year did that happen?

2014 and 2019

3. What were some of the reasons you chose that action?

- a. Future cost savings (contrary to belief, there are no immediate cost savings to be realized.)
- b. To improve department resiliency from a staffing, equipment and infrastructure perspective.
- c. To eliminate a common border in the Monroe merger and allow us to provide a more integrated and efficient service.
- d. To expand our financial base
- e. To improve our purchasing power related to apparatus, supplies, etc.
- f. To reduce or eliminate the costs related to station placement. Removing the border allowed us to combine two stations into one and to have more flexibility with future station planning.

4. Did we get the services we needed? Yes

- a. We added a lot of great talent and expertise to the new department through the mergers. Not just Firefighters and executive staff, but in admin and tech staff as well.
- b. Improved our services due to the particulars areas of expertise that each district brought to the table.
- c. Over time we are just starting to see some cost saving related to staffing. There is a lot of duplication in staffing at the outset of the mergers but it is necessary to retain that staffing level so that all the integration of systems, HR, training, logistics, etc. could be accomplished. Now, 5 years later, through retirements we are able to refine the org chart to streamline the organization. We will likely move some Chief's positions to civilian positions and not replace some of the positions affected by retirements.
- d. More political impact due to growing and strengthening the organization.
- e. The creation of more advancement opportunities within the organization. All three districts struggled with this issue due to our individual sizes resulting in the loss of highly qualified officers to other districts.

5. What were some of the challenges?

- a. Cultural integration. We made mistakes in both mergers. It's just part of the learning curve, nothing malicious. This issue should not be minimized or dismissed. We were fortunate that the unions with all the partners had merged prior to the district mergers.
 - b. Cultural integration for the Boards. In my opinion, we didn't do a good job here. We had strong relationships with the District 3 Board prior to the merger since we districts had a long working history but unexpected issues arose as the merger proceeded. The Boards should meet and compare visions, procedures, ego issues and compatibility. Since Commissioners are "part-time" employees the importance to building relationship strength in this area is often overlooked. We didn't have the same depth of working history with District 8 and it has taken longer to get us all on the same page.
 - c. Giving up local identities. All the partners rightfully take pride in the service they have provided to their "home" communities. That service history needs to be celebrated and valued but all the players (Officers, Firefighters and Boards) need to proactively embrace the new organization and fight to remove provincial bias in decision making and integrating to support the new corporate community.
 - d. A few things done backwards. We got very excited about our mergers and made all the announcements before getting all the due diligence done related to identifying challenges.
 - i. Joint Board meetings should be held before any announcements are made. Make sure the leadership can work together.
 - ii. Infrastructure inspections should be done before merger decisions are made.
 - iii. All the current employee contracts should be reviewed and issues identified before merger.
 - iv. Get an early start on merger impact issues with the respective labor groups.
 - v. Have the Chief(s) work out the organization chart of the new department prior to merger.
 - e. If it doesn't appear to be moving forward then stop. Don't succumb to internal or external pressure.
 - f. Don't keep merger fever. In my opinion doing two of these in four years was too fast. We just about burned out our admin staff by jumping into number 2 merger before the dust had settled on the first one. We went into the second one with a lower level of energy which complicated the cultural integration piece.
6. Are you satisfied with the input your agency has regarding provision of services?
- a. As stated above, District 7 was the biggest agency involved in our mergers. I am satisfied that our voice was at the table. We tried to not be the bully at the table as we had been the merger target of a larger agency earlier and we wanted to be sensitive to the smaller department's concerns. We still got feedback that the merger partners felt "talked over" and bullied to some degree. Some of that is just part of the process since not everyone is going to get their way on all issues.
7. Are you satisfied with the cost of the services you are receiving?

- a. Since these were mergers and not contracts it is difficult to answer this question. Going into the first merger we did have the expectation of seeing significant cost savings right away. That didn't happen and for valid reasons. By the second merger we had learned this lesson and realized that cost savings would be realized at a later time.
 - b. We did see cost savings related to supplies and equipment. Being able to buy more apparatus and support vehicles in one order has resulted in savings and the same is true of supplies.
 - c. We have seen additional costs in doing all the necessary systems integration, re-branding and technology upgrades.
8. Would you take the same action again?
- a. Tentatively yes. Since we have these past experiences to draw on it would be a more comfortable process.
 - i. Timing- I am in favor of not doing this again until the dust is settled on our recent mergers and the "shine" is back in the apple for the new department. This position introduces a tension. Some believe that you have to strike when the opportunity presents itself. Kind of just do it and fix the problems later. I don't agree with that approach.
 - ii. Re-branding- I understand that a new identity can be important. If your organization is going to get proactive with merging then re-branding is going to be very expensive. Our position now is that any future partner will be coming into the SFRF brand.
 - iii. Due diligence- I addressed these issues above. I wouldn't vote to merge again if we don't commit to doing a better job upfront.

In closing, I am happy with where we are as a new organization. First and foremost you have to realize that the work for a successful merger really starts after the public vote is taken. The leadership can't take a "well, that's done" attitude at that point. The process of successfully completing a merger takes a long time even without extraordinary challenges. I hope this is helpful.

Randy Fay, Commissioner

Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue (SFRF)

Response #2 of 2:

1. Did you merge with another Fire Department for contract for services?
Merged first with FD #3 then with Lake Stevens Fire.
2. What year did that happen?
These were done in the past 6 years.
3. What were some of the reasons you chose that action?

Regionalization, efficiency, Chief Retired, shared values, fill admin gaps in each agency (such as PIO, Fire Marshal, payroll staff, etc), better service delivery model.

4. Did we get the services we needed?

Yes in most cases streamlining things and blending jobs helped. Also with a larger department comes other issues. Personnel issues are greater because there are more people. This requires a larger staff to handle the increased paper trail and logistics to support these people. Firefighters need to be involved and informed at all levels

5. What were some of the challenges?

Challenges: hidden agendas and personalities, cultural differences, impact Bargaining (needs to be done before any merger) with contracts by IAFF, teamsters and senior staff, how business is done on a daily basis, different IT systems, different payroll systems, name change.

6. Are you satisfied with the input your agency has regarding provision of services?

Satisfied yes

7. Are you satisfied with the cost of the services you are receiving?

Cost higher than I thought it would be.

8. Would you take the same action again?

First merger yes. Second merger no, we should have waited longer to settle in to the first cultural change.

Roy Waugh, SRRF Board Chair