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Consolidated fire-and-rescue department blazes new trail

By **Paula Holzman**
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Robert McCoy is chief of York Area United Fire & Rescue. The Springettsbury and Spring Garden townships' fire companies consolidated to form the new regional fire department. McCoy visited the Victory Station in Spring Garden Township for the annual fire-hose testing Sept. 29. Photo/Amy Spangler

Plenty of people are probably watching Robert McCoy, and he knows it.

McCoy is chief of the fledgling [York Area United Fire & Rescue](#) (YAUFR), Pennsylvania's first regional fire department with both paid and volunteer firefighters.

The attention is welcome, however, because department supporters hope YAUFR becomes a model for fire departments statewide looking to merge.

And consolidation - among fire departments, police departments or municipalities - is an option McCoy and others say is becoming increasingly attractive as prices rise, regulations on emergency-service providers increase and the economy sours.

"I think (YAUFR's creation) may cause people to think about whether a merger would be beneficial," McCoy said. "Everyone is watching to see how this goes."

The merger process between the [Springettsbury](#) and [Spring Garden](#) township fire departments has been lengthy because of the lack of precedent, McCoy said, and small, unexpected issues like getting correct license plates and fixing regulations so both townships' mechanics are allowed to work on the new equipment have sometimes slowed the process to a crawl.

A pair of exploratory reports commissioned by a 13-member [Joint Fire Services Committee](#) in 2006 spotlighted many potential benefits of the merger (see "Behind the merger," page 9). The reports concluded that a merger would help the departments achieve greater efficiencies and save money.

McCoy thinks a few more years will pass before the citizens of Springettsbury and Spring Garden will see savings because of a series of startup costs. These include everything from stationary and uniforms to the creation of a new administrative center for the department.

Grant funds have offset some of the costs, McCoy said, and the department continues to seek more grants.

Cost savings aren't the only reason for the merger, however. The task force's report stated that the new configuration will provide for more rapid response times. For example, in the case of larger incidents that formerly would have required assistance from the other department, only one department has to be activated. The firefighters will work better as a team because all have received the same training, according to the reports.

Another advantage predicted by the reports is that the new department can station firefighters where the need is. McCoy said the department is still working through the reports'

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recommendations to close Victory Station and merge its staff with that of the Grantley Station. Both of these stations are in Spring Garden Township. The Grantley Station then would be relocated into the Tri-Hill area, where McCoy said firefighters could better cover the entire area.

Although YAUFRR officially exists, the merger process is not finished.

"The biggest issue is the (paid-firefighters) contract - that's the biggest hurdle," McCoy said.

Talks continue between the union and the department, he said.

In addition to the contract and plans to consolidate fire stations, YAUFRR and the townships are now working to piece together the department's first budget, which both townships must approve. The current arrangement stipulates Spring Garden will assume 45 percent of the department's costs, while Springettsbury will cover the remaining 55 percent.

The new department was created to facilitate the process if other townships are interested in joining YAUFRR, McCoy said. Although he hasn't been directly approached by other townships' officials looking to merge, McCoy said there are many issues he believes make consolidation an attractive option.

"Fuel costs have gone through the roof for small townships trying to staff and maintain a complete fleet," he said.

In addition, he said the poor economy has decreased people's willingness to volunteer for fire departments because they no longer have the time - a trend McCoy expects to continue.

Eric Menzer, chair of YorkCounts' board and executive vice president of Wagman Construction Inc. in Manchester Township, praised YAUFRR as "fantastic" and "a great example of common sense." YorkCounts is a community-action group that aims to foster collaboration to improve the quality of life in York County.

One of the recommendations from Metro-York, a YorkCounts task force, is to establish a Metro-York regional police department that includes York and several of its surrounding townships.

The new Metro-York department would "allow high-quality policing through the regional resources that can dispersed not based on municipal boundaries," Menzer said.

The York City Police Department handles the majority of the county's drug-trafficking cases but has fewer resources than its neighbors, he said, and what happens in York doesn't stay within city boundaries.

"We turn the worst public-safety problem in the county over to the most under-resourced department and expect them to deal with it," he said. "We're trying to fight a regional problem with antiquated constraints."

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Behind the merger

York Area United Fire & Rescue (YAUFRR) was created by a merger between the fire departments of Spring Garden and Springettsbury townships in May 2008. The process began in 2002, spurred by the departments' increasing difficulty at finding volunteers.

The townships established a 13-member Joint Fire Services Committee to guide the merger. The committee included elected representatives, fire-services officials and citizens from both townships.

In 2006, the committee commissioned two reports to weigh the pros and cons of a merger. The report performed by Carroll Burracker & Associates estimated the merger will save \$1.3 million over a 20-year period in equipment/maintenance costs, plus a possible one-time boost of \$60,000 from the resale of redundant equipment.

The report made the case for mergers nationwide by quoting Herman W. Brice, chief of the Palm Beach County, Fla., fire department: "Due to budget constraints, increased demand for service, and increased levels of training and certification requirements by state and federal agencies, emergency-services providers and local governments will find it necessary to consolidate smaller departments into regional service providers to take advantage of broader tax bases."

The second report, completed by the Governor's Center for Local Government Services, stated that efficiencies in operations, purchasing and training would be the most likely benefits of the merger, though financial benefits were possible with sound fiscal policies.

"The proximity of the townships to each other, the similarities in the operations of each department and the parallel needs of the citizens of each municipality make a compelling case for consolidation of the two departments," the report stated.

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