

## Regionalization Works

From Don Konkle PFESI Executive Director

Firefighters see promising results in regionalization  
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In one of the most interesting observations made by this column during 2011, volunteer firefighters came across as one of the more positive groups in discussions of regionalization.

Volunteer firefighters are a special breed. Their history dates to the colonial days when Benjamin Franklin organized bucket brigades and volunteer firefighting companies. Because of the nature of those horse-and-buggy days, there literally could be a fire brigade on every block. Hence the social aspect which, to this day, works for and against updating fire services in many communities.

Over the centuries, volunteer firefighters have left warm beds to rush through the cold of night to battle fires of all sizes. Tens of thousands of lives have been saved and billions in property has been spared destruction because volunteers were ready and able to respond to the alarm. Often that alarm was a siren and town folk knew that a fire had broken out somewhere. Sometimes the siren or air horn signaled in code, such as two short blasts and three long blasts, and people had the street list taped on a kitchen wall. As Luzerne County has lost population over the last 80 years, our religious, social, fraternal and government institutions have undergone downsizing or elimination.

Volunteer fire companies have not been spared this pain of change. Alas, in some towns, change such as consolidation of two smaller fire companies into one has been accomplished only with much acrimony and hesitation, but manpower and financial realities have forced the issue. In other communities, reason has prevailed, albeit with some emotional pain.

The good news is that the younger generation of volunteer firefighters has seen the light and they are helping forge new protocols and alliances. One veteran firefighter told me that the face and shape of volunteer fire protection will be dramatically different, and vastly improved, within the next generation.

One of the driving forces is the training that young men, and women, receive when they enlist as volunteers. The training is far superior to that of, say, the mid-20th century. "These kids want to use that training. It isn't used if their small-town fire company responds only 35 times a day. When fire companies link up and create new protocols, they get a chance to use their training more often. This is a win-win for everyone," the veteran said.

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Another plus is the adoption of combined full-time/volunteer firefighter and paramedic organizations across community lines. Kingston-Forty Fort is an example, with the added bonus that a small community like Pringle also gets rapid coverage. The new Hanover Area Fire District holds the same promise. Firefighters in other areas have told me that they hope to move beyond mutual aid to true regional departments, down to common-sense purchase of equipment so as to eliminate costly redundancies.

Last year's creation of a multi-community zoned response protocol is another step forward. Wilkes-Barre, Hanover Township, Plains Township, the Kingston-Forty Fort unit and the private Spellman Ambulance Co. provide back up to each other.

It is heartening to see young people who have their eyes on the target: Saving lives and saving property. They have less concern for geographical boundaries than for the value of a life. They recognize that the name of the fire engine or ambulance is not as important as the arrival and role of the people riding the apparatus regardless of where it is.

One young man said that it may take many meetings and lots of planning and tweaking but, in the end, communities will have better fire, rescue and ambulance services.

"Stand by for developments," he said, with a twinkle in his eye.

We should applaud this positive attitude as the New Year dawns.

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Read more: <http://citizensvoice.com/news/firefighters-see-promising-results-in-regionalization-1.1255312#ixzz1j4YT5Dvd>