

## Executive Summary

Emergency Services Consulting International (ESCI) was engaged by the Burning Mountains Fire Protection District (BMFPD), Rifle Fire Protection (RFPD), Glenwood Springs Rural Fire Protection District (GSRFPD), and the City of Glenwood Springs Fire Department (GSFD) to conduct an Agency Evaluation and Cooperative Efforts Study. The purpose of the evaluation was to analyze and determine the feasibility of more efficient cooperation between the agencies, up to and including strategies of consolidation. This report is the culmination of that evaluation.

ESCI thanks the staff of BMFPD, GSFD, GSRFPD, and RFPD for their outstanding cooperation in the preparation of this report. All involved were candid in their comments and provided an enormous amount of background information and review of draft documents.

The study took into account the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, challenges, and critical issues facing the fire and EMS departments and how such matters affect the effort to construct a model for efficient service. Those issues identified were analyzed and specific recommendations can be found in the section titled, Appendix C: Summary Table of Recommended Actions (Current Conditions).

### Evaluation of Current Conditions

An analysis of current conditions of the fire agencies is catalogued in eight survey tables presented in a side-by-side table for simplicity of comparison. Each of the tables provides the reader with general information about that element as well as specific observations and an analysis of any significant issues or conditions that are pertinent to the topic discussed. Observations are supported by data collected during the information gathering process, through analysis of the collected data, and from the collective emergency services experience of the ESCI project team. Current conditions also encompassed emergency service delivery and performance and fiscal analysis. This snapshot in time was the basis for developing collaborative strategies.

Current conditions survey tables include an overview of each agency, an evaluation of management, staffing and personnel management, service delivery and performance, training programs, fire prevention programs, Emergency Medical Services (EMS) support and system oversight, capital asset and improvement programs, and fiscal analysis.

Criteria used to evaluate the organizations have been developed over many years. These gauges include relevant guidelines from national accreditation criteria, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards, federal and state mandates for fire and EMS systems, recommendations by various organizations such as the Center for Public Safety Excellence (CPSE), and generally accepted best practices within the fire and EMS industry.

### Leadership

Each of the fire and EMS agencies has a customer service ethic that stands out in the eyes of the consulting team. This ethos pervades the culture of the fire districts and the fire department; although the agencies approach service delivery differently, they do so with a sharp focus on doing the right thing for their respective constituents. The leaders of the districts and city and the fire chiefs are resolute in their desire to serve the public with distinction and have leveraged their resources to the greatest benefit of the community. The administrative team of the GSFD is stretched thin, and in the interest of cooperation unselfishly held the vacant position of fire chief open throughout this study. ESCI applauds the extra effort and sacrifice of City Manager, Jeff Hecksel, Acting Fire Chief Gary Tillotson, and Administrative Assistant Erin Williams in carrying an extra load that allowed for a greater number of options for collaboration.

### Agency Comparisons

In general, ESCI's review found that the agencies are performing comparably to other fire departments of similar size, population served, and character. In some cases, BMFPD, GSFD, and RFPD exceed what ESCI would expect for the area served and tax levy rate. It is uncommon for fire departments to provide the breadth and level of services as was found here; EMS and EMS transport being but one example.

### Service Delivery

The four jurisdictions provide fire protection and emergency medical services to a total service area of approximately 774 square miles. Collectively the three service providers cover nearly 43 linear miles of Interstate 70. The communities of Rifle, Silt, New Castle, and Glenwood Springs along Interstate 70 comprise the majority of service demand for emergency fire protection and medical services. Approximately 94 percent of the structures protected by BMFPD, GSFD, and RFPD are within a five-mile travel distance of a fire station.

Total calls for service have decreased for GSFD (11.2 percent) and RFPD (17.9 percent) in the recent two-year period. During the same period, total calls for service have increased for

BMFPD. In 2010 the ambulance provider, the Town of Silt (dba: WestCare Ambulance), stopped providing emergency first responder and transport service in the BMFPD service area. The result has been an increase in the number of EMS calls for BMFPD.

GIS analysis finds that 83 percent of the total incidents displayed and 69 percent of fire incidents are within six minutes travel time of a fire station. Current station locations within the three agencies are well located to meet the study area's current service demand.

BMFPD Fire Station No. 61 is the only station within eight-minute travel of the town of Silt. There is a small amount of dual coverage from Fire Station Nos. 62 and 64 to the east. BMFPD Fire Station Nos. 62, 63, and 64 provide good multiple fire station response in the New Castle area. All of the community is within eight minutes travel of Fire Stations 62 and 64, and a large portion is reached in 8 minutes by all three stations.

Fire station locations in Glenwood Springs provide excellent eight-minute coverage for the urban area within the City. The downtown core is within eight minutes of all three GSFD stations. This downtown area is regarded as a high risk area due to population density, incident density, and building density; therefore the availability of multiple apparatus from multiple stations is appropriate.

The developed areas within the City of Rifle are within an eight-minute travel time of two RFPD fire stations. The commercial development to the south of Interstate 70 near the junction of Interstate 70 and State Highway 13 is served by all three RFPD fire stations in eight minutes. Additionally, a significant amount of the District east of the City along Highway 6 is within eight minutes of Fire Station Nos. 41 and 43.

ESCI found that dropped borders improved response performance of all the agencies. For instance, instead of waiting for additional manpower to staff a water tender, the closest available tender from the nearest fire station may be added to the initial response. ESCI recommends that the study area jurisdictions use this kind of arrangement to enhance response and concentration of resources whenever possible.

The most frequently recorded response time in 2010 was in the six-minute range. The average overall response time was 7 minutes 32 seconds. 90 percent of incidents were answered within 14 minutes 17 seconds in the study area and 81 percent of all calls for service were answered in 10 minutes or less.

Approximately 57 percent of incidents occurred as a single event in the study area, thus 43 percent of the time there was more than one incident occurring somewhere within the three jurisdictions. In 2010 there were two instances (0.1 percent) when 10 incidents occurred simultaneously. In general, the highest number of concurrent incidents (3:00 PM and 10:00 PM in BMFPD, 3:00 PM in GSFD and GSRFPD, and 4:00 PM in RFPD) occurred in the late afternoon in the study area jurisdictions.

As expected for each agency, first out ambulances and engines had the highest UHU (unit hour utilization) percentage. Apparatus such as ladder trucks, tenders, or Haz-Mat units typically have lower rates of use due to their specialized nature.

Based on ESCI's analysis, fire station reliability for each jurisdiction should be high and would not adversely affect response performance. ESCI recommends that each agency identify first due fire station response areas, monitor apparatus and station workload, and track performance in first due areas to anticipate workload issues that could affect response time performance.

### Financial Status

Given that the districts receive the majority of their revenue through property taxes, there is a direct correlation between their financial health and the growth or decline of the TAV (taxable assessed value). There are two components for the calculation of Taxable Assessed Value (TAV) for the four agencies participating in this study. Burning Mountains and Rifle FPDs rely primarily on oil/gas taxes to fund the Districts. The City of Glenwood Springs' revenue is generated principally from sales tax and property tax. Glenwood Springs RFPD is entirely supported by property taxes.

In projecting future sales prices for oil and gas, ESCI used the Henry Hub<sup>1</sup> natural gas pricing projections for the lower 48 states. This pricing may vary from the actual prices in Garfield County but will provide pricing trends for the next ten years.

BMFPD forecast that the 2011 budget will not be spent as budgeted leaving excess funds of \$900,000 to be carried over to 2012; the organization expects to see an increasing ending fund balance through 2016. A forecast 23.7 percent decline in TAVs in GSRFPD will create a significant drop in property tax revenue. With this projected decline in revenue, GSRFPD is forecast to be operating at a deficit cash flow through 2016. The financial fund summary of

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<sup>1</sup> [www.eia.doe.gov](http://www.eia.doe.gov).

RFPD shows an increasing ending fund balance through 2016, primarily caused by increases in the value of gas and oil TAV. Increases are offset to a degree by a soft housing market, slow growth, and inflation.

### Opportunities for Cooperative Efforts

This section of the report evaluated the resources, services, proximity, demand, and opportunities for the four agencies to reduce costs, increase efficiency, or enhance service delivery through cooperative efforts.

This report cites 42 separate strategies through increased cooperation to generally build an improved system by more closely aligning the agencies. Some of the strategies require strategic investments to implement. Individual strategies not requiring a substantial investment beyond soft costs and yielding economic or operational efficiencies can and should be considered for implementation. Those strategies include:

- Strategy B – Adopt Dropped Border Response
- Strategy C – Develop Uniform Pre-Incident Plans
- Strategy E – Provide Regional Incident Command and Operations Supervision
- Strategy G – Develop Standard Operating Guidelines
- Strategy H – Shared Specialty Teams
- Strategy I – Provide Joint Standards for Service Delivery
- Strategy K – Develop Deployment Standards
- Strategy L – Shared Public Education/Public Information
- Strategy M – Shared or Common RMS (Records Management System)
- Strategy N – Shared Intern Program
- Strategy O – Shared Volunteer Services
- Strategy R – Implement Criteria Based Dispatching
- Strategy S – Implement a Training RMS (Records Management System)
- Strategy T – Develop Mutual Training Strategies
- Strategy U – Develop an Annual Shared Training Plan
- Strategy V – Consolidate Training into a Single Training Division
- Strategy W – Develop and Adopt Training Standards
- Strategy X – Develop a Shared Training Manual
- Strategy Y – Develop a Shared Fire and EMS Training Facility
- Strategy BB – Complete the AVL and MDC/MDT Project

- Strategy FF – Develop Uniform Fees for Service
- Strategy HH – Adopt a Single Fire Code and Amendments
- Strategy KK – Create Shared Methods to Provide Medic Unit Surge Capacity
- Strategy LL – Provide System-Wide Guidelines for EMS Response
- Strategy NN – Develop Centralized EMS Billing
- Strategy OO – Provide BLS and Inter-Facility EMS Transport Services
- Strategy PP – Annex Unprotected Property into a Fire Protection District

In addition to the above strategies, there are nine overarching strategies that address organizational structure and governance:

- Overarching Strategy 1 – Status Quo (Continuation of Current Efforts of Cooperation)
- Overarching Strategy 2 – Administrative Consolidation
- Overarching Strategy 3 – Operational Consolidation
- Overarching Strategy 4 – FA (Fire Authority)
- Overarching Strategy 5 – Formation of a New Fire District
- Overarching Strategy 6 – Annexation of the City of Glenwood Springs into GSRFPD
- Overarching Strategy 7 – Align Mill Levy Rates and Annex FPDs
- Overarching Strategy 8 – Merge BMFPD and RFPD
- Overarching Strategy 9 – Merge BMFPD and RFPD and a Portion of GSRFPD and Merge Glenwood Springs and a Portion of GSRFPD

### Findings and Recommendations

During this process, ESCI found that BMFPD, GSFD, GSRFPD, and RFPD had many characteristics that are found in progressive emergency service agencies. A listing of a few characteristics includes a shared EMS medical director, automatic aid, and joint training. Much of the responsibility is directly related to the positive efforts and working relationship fostered by the current leadership. Fire Chief Brit McLin, Acting Fire Chief Gary Tillotson, and Fire Chief Mike Morgan have created an atmosphere that is benefiting the public, the employees, and the four organizations.

Based on ESCI's work of developing organizational Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Challenges (SWOC), evaluation of current conditions, fiscal analysis, and based on our experience with other projects of similar character and scope, we draw certain conclusions regarding Burning Mountains Fire Protection District, Glenwood Springs Fire Department,

Glenwood Springs Rural Fire Protection District, and Rifle Fire Protection District, the region, and opportunities for cooperative efforts. A summary of those findings follows:

- BMFPD, GSFD, GSRFPD, and RFPD are Interdependent
- BMFPD, GSFD, and RFPD Value Customer Service
- BMFPD, GSFD, GSRFPD, and RFPD Meet the Public's Service Expectation
- Existing Partnerships Reduce Duplicated Effort
- Volunteers and Part-time Employees Play an Active Role in Fire Protection
- Other Organizations Should be Included in Partnership Initiatives
- Garfield County is Geographically Diverse and Unique
- Garfield County Region is Politically Diverse
- The Regional Transportation System Limits Emergency Response
- Internal and External Forces Act on BMFPD, GSFD, GSRFPD, and RFPD
- An Integration, Alliance, or Consolidation of BMFPD, GSFD, GSRFPD, and RFPD has Local Political Support
- BMFPD, GSFD, GSRFPD, and RFPD Policymakers Should Develop a Plan to Implement Partnership Opportunities
- Many Opportunities Exist for Cost Avoidance
- Consolidation of BMFPD, GSFD, GSRFPD, and RFPD is Feasible
- All Other Cooperative Opportunities are Feasible

Any cooperative venture between the fire protection districts and the city presents the organizational leaders with a series of challenges. Successful implementation will require that significant matters be addressed regardless if or which form or level of cooperative effort is chosen.

Keeping the status quo and continuing the current efforts of cooperation between the fire departments has merit and will produce short-term benefits. As with any relationship that lacks long-term commitment, it is inevitable that a change in governing bodies, agency administration, financial situation, vision, or turning inward of focus will lead to a breakdown of cooperation. It is ESCI's experience that for mutual benefit of the region, development of a regional vision and an IGA has a greater potential for long-term success.

An administrative consolidation would produce significant cost avoidance and have minimal or little impact on fire and EMS operations. In ESCI's experience, the complexities of managing separate operational units and a lack of long-term commitment for future alignment of the

agencies makes this strategy better suited to being transitional versus long-term. Frustrations of maintaining separate organizations and answering to multiple policy boards is inefficient and defeating. Implementation of this strategy is envisioned as an intermediary step that leads to a more unified fire and EMS agency.

An operational consolidation would produce significant cost avoidance but would have an impact on fire and EMS administration. In ESCI's experience, the complexities of managing separate administration sections would result in greater harm to the organizations than the benefits. A question of "who is in charge" and reporting structure would be challenging for operations personnel; likewise, the assignment of duties and "who do I take orders from." Implementation of this strategy for all but the briefest of times as an intermediary step to a unified agency is discouraged.

An FA (Fire Authority) allows the four fire agencies to have input on services to be provided, levels of service, budgets, and governance decisions. This strategy can provide cost avoidance in administrative, operational, and capital costs. It allows for long-term planning for facilities, apparatus, equipment, and staffing.

The formation of a new fire district is not feasible. A real or perceived loss of control, the time to accomplish, and a possible increase in levy rates to some citizens, doom the concept. During interviews and community meetings, internal and external stakeholders expressed to ESCI that the creation of a new fire district would lack public and the political support of elected officials.

Annexation of the City of Glenwood Springs to the GSRFPD is financially unsustainable. The financial analysis of the strategy shows that the property tax method of providing revenue to the GSRFPD will result in a cash shortfall of \$600,000 to \$900,000 per year through 2016.

Annexation of the City of Glenwood Springs would require voter approval. Assuming a successful outcome, annexation would not require a vote if rates are adjusted to the lowest mill levy.

The strategy of merging BMFPD and RFPD is considered feasible. Revenue is relatively constant with the individual agencies while operating expenses are forecast to decrease. This strategy would not alter services, service levels, or change response time performance. BMFPD and RFPD have the most in common of the four agencies; both are FPDs, have a

contract for shared personnel, have comparable geographic response areas, and maintain similar capital apparatus.

Merging BMFPD and RFPD and a portion of GRFPD and merging Glenwood Springs and a portion of GSRFPD financially is not considered feasible. Operating expenses remain unchanged for each of the agencies, revenue would be reduced for the remaining GSRFPD, and increase for the merged BMFPD, RFPD, and the annexed western portion of GSRFPD. This strategy does offer a reduced response time for the annexed western portion of GSRFPD. However, the same result can be expected with implementation of Strategy B – Adopt Dropped Border Response.

### Recommendations

ESCI recommends that Overarching Strategy 4 – FA (Fire Authority) be the first course of action adopted by the Glenwood City Council and fire district BODs. Establishment of an FA should be under an IGA with terms and conditions developed and agreed upon by the elected officials.

1. Reduction to one fire chief position. The combined service area has three fire chiefs for that represent four fire agencies and the three fire service providers. With a combined career and volunteer workforce of nearly 150 personnel, the size of a unified fire agency is appropriately directed by a single fire chief dedicated to administration duties.
2. The service area of BMFPD, GSFD, and RFPD covers 774 square miles including the contracted service area, which is served by nine fire stations (excludes one reserve). A battalion chief configuration is appropriate to the number of fire stations supervised but not to the distance traveled. Moving forward it is preferable to establish two battalions to serve the FA and should be a goal of the amalgamated organization.
3. An FA accomplished with an IGA (intergovernmental agreement), with each of the agencies retaining taxing authority, governance, maintains local control. An IGA model is considered an interim step for aligning the agencies. The long-term goal should be to merge the four agencies into a single regional fire and emergency service provider.
4. This FA administrative and support staffing concept will result in a cost avoidance of approximately \$289,010 plus applicable benefit decreases primarily in the medical insurance costs. Pay equalization between the departments will result in a slight net increase of personnel costs for an FA; while total compensation is nearly equivalent. The FA strategy makes the assumption that all pay levels will eventually move to the highest level. However, overall operations staffing costs will decrease by \$118,309 plus applicable benefit decreases; primarily in the medical insurance costs.
5. An FA allows the four fire agencies to have input on services to be provided, levels of service, budgets, and governance; policy level decisions. This strategy can provide cost avoidance in administrative, operational, and capital costs. It allows for long-term planning for facilities, apparatus, equipment, and staffing.
6. BMFPD, GSRFPD, and RFPD rely primarily on property taxes for funding. With tax limitation laws, a volatile housing market, and fluctuating gas and oil prices, the amount

of revenue collected by the districts is variable. The City of Glenwood Springs has some property tax revenue but relies more heavily on sales tax to support the general fund and thus the fire department. The other source of revenue for the three fire and emergency service providers is revenue from fees for service; primarily EMS and transport services. There is a benefit, balance, and stability with three potential sources of revenue for an FA.