

INTER-MUNICIPAL COOPERATION IN THE FIRE SERVICES

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INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

In order to achieve efficiencies and cost savings, there has been a trend in local governments to look towards amalgamation, regionalization of services, shared service agreements, and alternate service delivery methods. It is hypothesized, that engaging in consolidated/amalgamated, or cooperative inter-municipal service arrangements could be a strategic means of achieving efficiencies and cost savings through economies of scale.

The purpose of this project was to answer three questions:

1. Should fire departments enter into consolidated/amalgamated or cooperative inter-municipal agreements for service with neighbouring municipalities?
2. Could consolidated/amalgamated or cooperative inter-municipal service arrangements help fire departments recognize efficiencies and cost savings through economies of scale for service delivery?
3. Should steps be taken towards additional inter-municipal cooperation between the fire services of the City of North Vancouver, the District of North Vancouver, and the District of West Vancouver?

METHODS

A literature review explored the academic research on consolidation/amalgamation, as well as, cooperative inter-municipal services in the province of British Columbia, Canada, the United States, and abroad. The scope of the research was not restricted to the fire service, but was purposely left broad so as to encompass the potential effects on local government holistically, and thereby, should be considered relevant to other local government services.

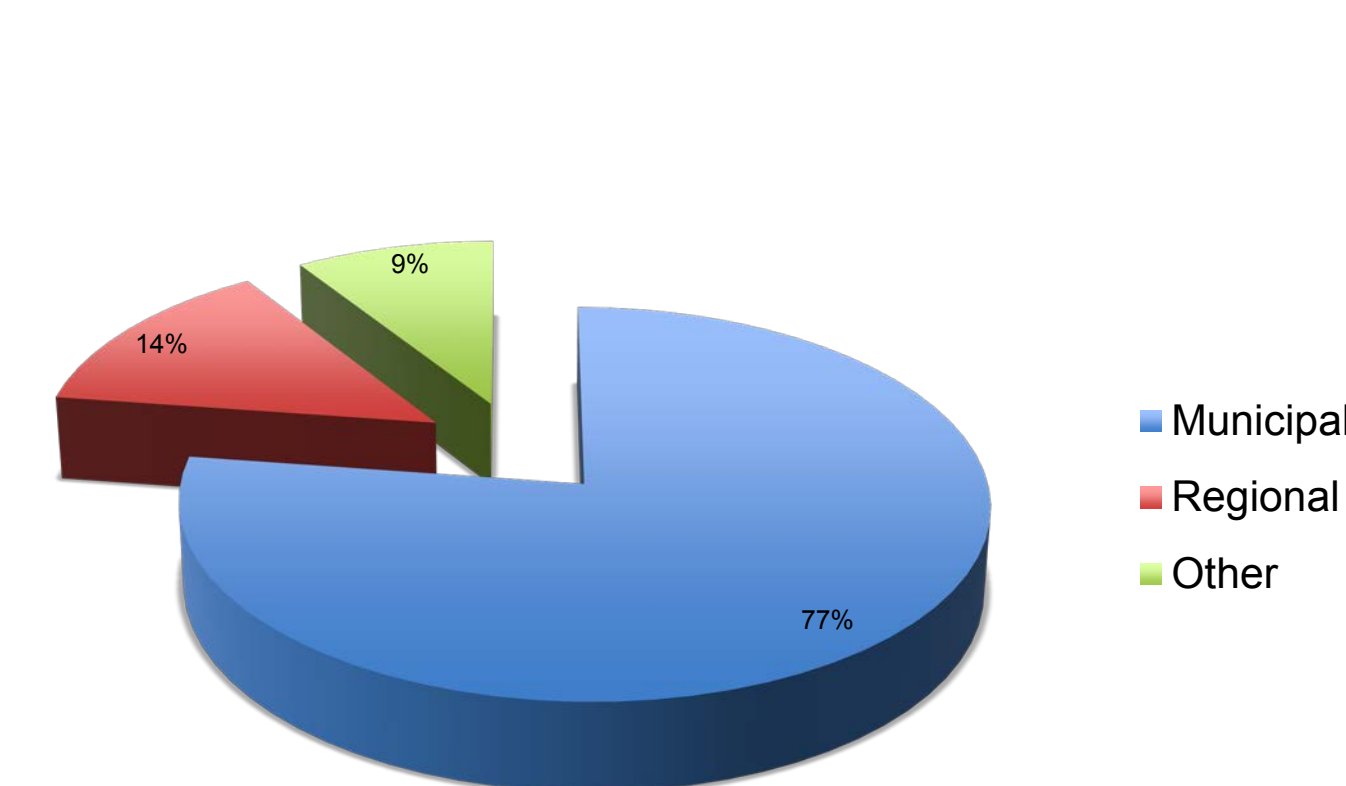
A province-wide survey was circulated to the career and volunteer fire departments in British Columbia. The purpose was to compile quantitative and qualitative data related to the capacity to provide efficiencies and economies of scale to consolidation/amalgamation and cooperative inter-municipal efforts in the BC Fire Service. The confidential questionnaire was distributed with the assistance of the Fire Chiefs Association of BC to 326 member fire departments. The survey was open for a two week period.

RESULTS

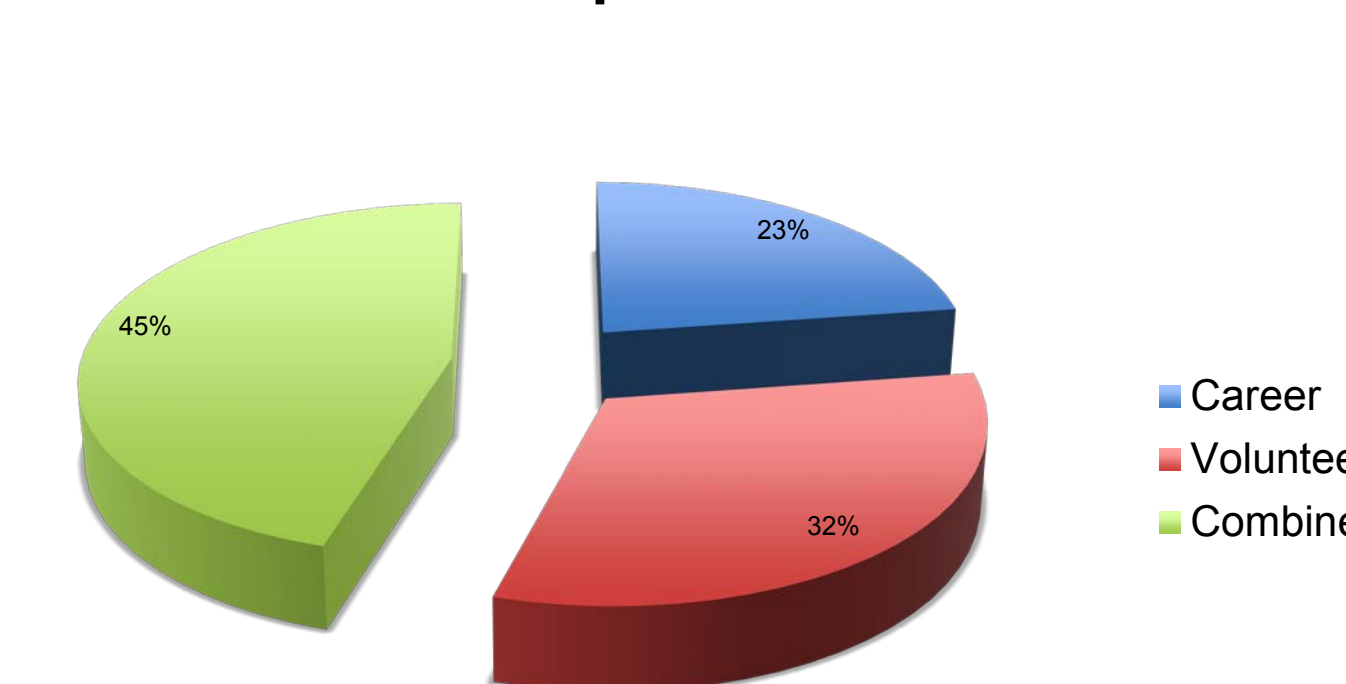
Of the 326 questionnaires distributed, 22 completed questionnaires were received representing a return of 6.7%. The respondents collectively represented 1064 career members (28% of the career provincial members), and an additional 678 volunteer members.

Of the respondents 77% of the replies were from municipal departments, 14% regional, and 9% were improvement district or industrial. A breakdown of the responses shows 91% of respondents participate in mutual aid agreements, 41% in automatic aid, 1% are consolidated/amalgamated fire services, and that 64% participate in shared service arrangements. Of the respondents that participate in shared service arrangements, 43% indicated that they have a written contract for the service provision.

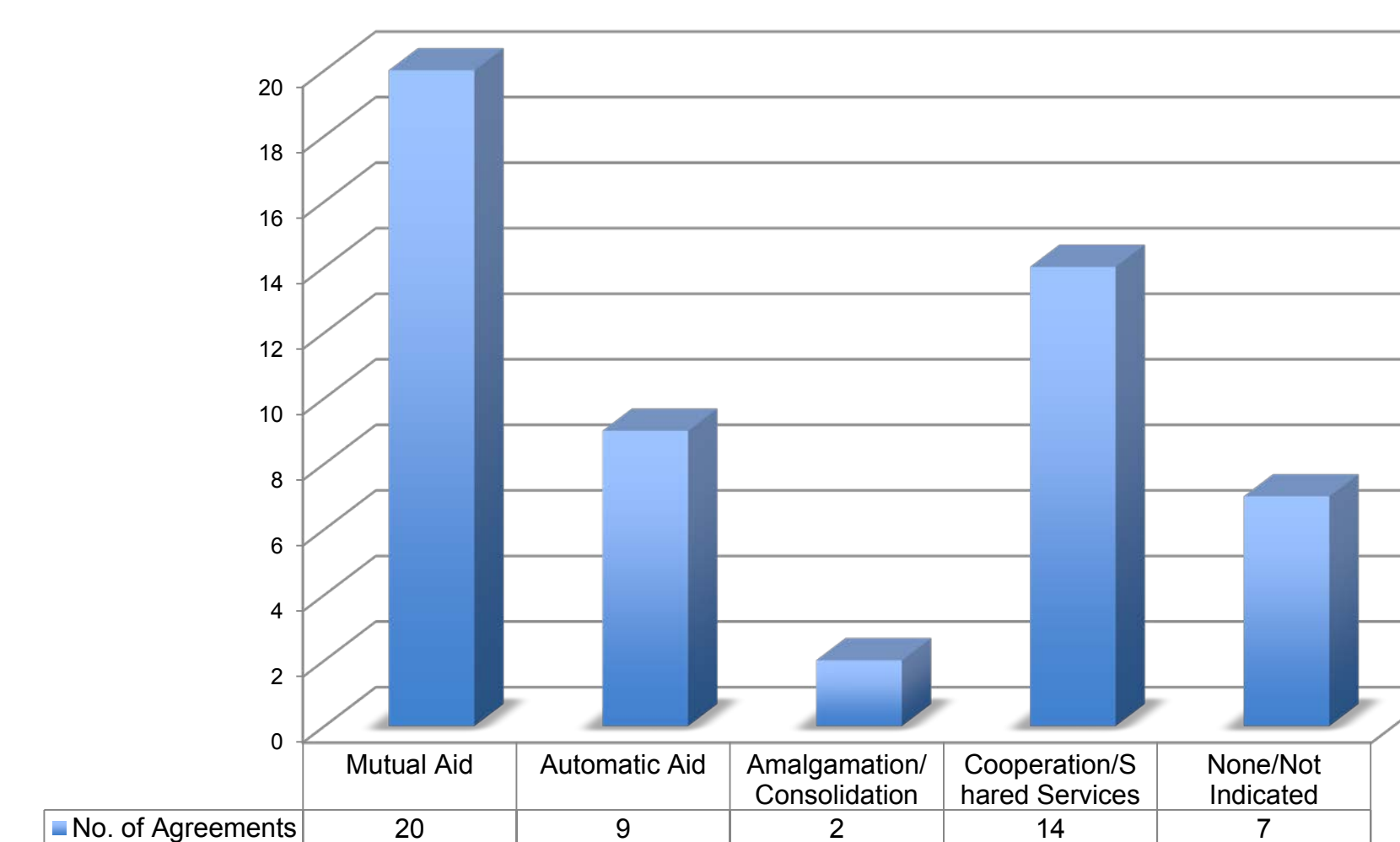
Type of Local Government Classification of Respondents



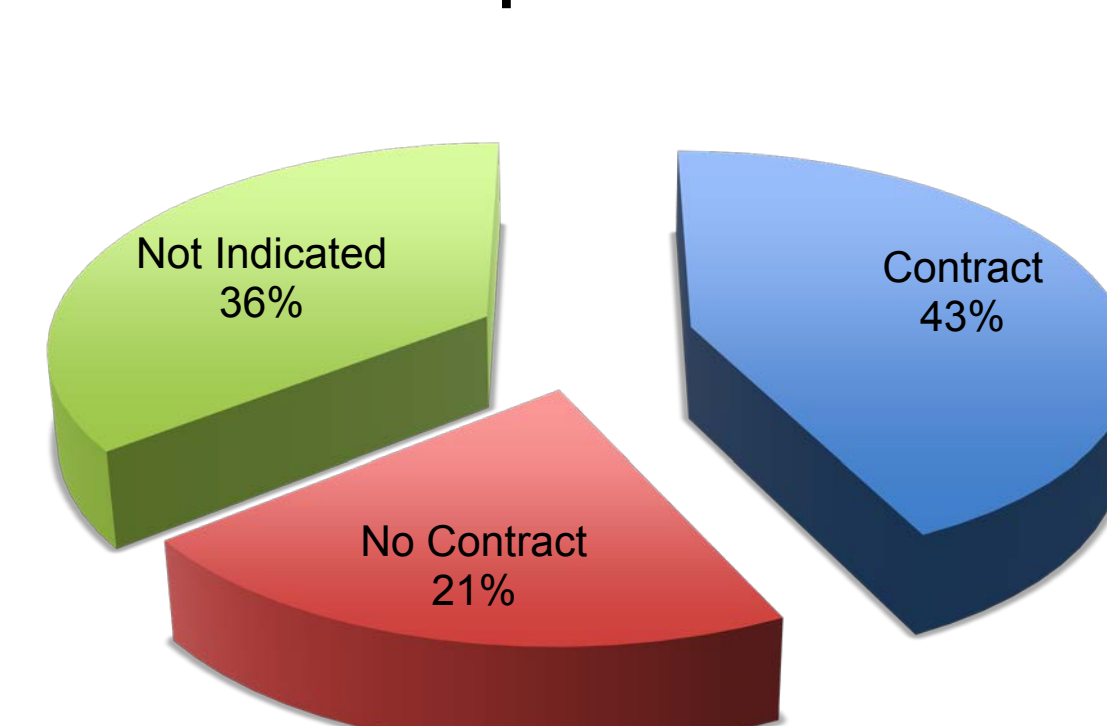
Types of Fire Service Represented by Respondents



Respondents' Agreements in Effect



Shared Services/Inter Municipal Cooperation Contracts of Respondents



DISCUSSION

The literature review does not support that amalgamations and the creation of big cities, automatically result in economies of scale. Instead there are multiple examples of higher spending, service delivery issues, and a citizen disconnect from government. However, residents of neighbouring municipalities share common problems and needs, and often those are not defined by boundaries. There is recognition that second-tier government services as well as inter-municipal cooperation could result in efficiency, equity, and support of civic voice.

The qualitative feedback from the participants of the questionnaire should be considered as a valuable tool when planning a change in service provision, as their opinions represent a variety of expert experiences. Comments related to challenges included that there may be rivalries, a fear of political interference, concerns of inequity in cost sharing, and recognition that the demand level of a service may change with growth and prove to have a negative effect on an agreement. Such issues need to be addressed when considering an environmental scan of the impact that such a change could have on an organization, and mitigation strategies considered before implementation.

APPLICATION

Budget constraints are a reality in local governance. Many municipalities are realizing the challenges associated with achieving or increasing service levels, without increasing the costs to its citizens. Fire departments are particularly challenged, as in many cases costs cannot be decreased without decreasing manpower, and thus the level of service. To address this need, planning and providing service improvements through economies of scale should be part of the strategic planning process of every fire service.

CONCLUSION

The literature review and survey results support inter-municipal service provision to achieve economies of scale. However, the potential may not exist in all service areas, thus amalgamations for the purpose of achieving economies of scale are unlikely to succeed. Cost and efficiency analysis should be performed to determine probability of success of service changes by functional area.

Undertaking a successful inter-municipal cooperative service arrangement could be accomplished. Yet, success of any program implementation requires careful evaluation, planning, implementation, and measurement.

KEY REFERENCES

Siegmann, Haida (2015). Inter-Municipal Cooperation in the Fire Services, project literature review.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

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