

14.0 Volunteer Membership

The key to the delivery of fire services in the Town of Bethlehem is the health of the volunteer system. That system is composed of the volunteer membership of each of the five fire districts. Manitou, Inc. used several techniques to assess the health of the volunteer system. Nationally, volunteer participation is declining. Reasons include increasing training requirements, the rise of the suburban two-worker or two-job family, and expanded choices for activities in society.

To assess the current and future health of the volunteer system, Manitou, Inc. used a number of techniques. Aside from interviews with district commissioners and chiefs, we used two techniques to better understand the dynamics of the volunteer membership within the town. First, we conducted two focus groups. These focus groups were used to elicit broad themes, which were followed up with a general survey of departmental members.

14.1 Focus Groups

A series of two focus groups were held at the Elsmere fire station on April 2, 2011. These focus groups consisted of members of each of the five fire districts. Participation was restricted to non-commissioners and non-chief officers to assure that we received input from “rank and file” members. Each focus group took approximately 90 minutes, and was limited to 12-14 participants.

The questions guiding the focus groups centered on a few key thematic areas, and Manitou, Inc. allowed members to discuss these topics in detail. The purpose of the focus groups was to get a feel for issues and concerns and to identify any significant threats or opportunities facing the volunteers. The questions asked in the focus group were:

1. *How are things going in the town overall?*
2. *Where do you see yourself, your district, and the town in 10 years?*
3. *Would you be willing to reduce the amount of apparatus your district has in order to provide more efficient service?*
4. *How important is departmental or station membership to your providing fire service to the town? Would you be willing to give up apparatus or move stations in order to deliver better service?*

In response to the first question (“*How are things going in the town overall?*”), there was general agreement that fire services in the town functioned fairly well. There were several concerns raised, namely about challenges of staffing apparatus during the daytime. Participants indicated that it was difficult to staff apparatus during the daytime.

False alarms were also a problem because they discouraged members from responding, which could ultimately lead to a poor response in the event of a real fire. Other concerns included inconsistency between chiefs in calling for mutual aid.

There was a concern about rivalries between older members of the departments. It was perceived that younger members were more open to working together to solve problems.

Members also felt that incident command use had increased in all departments and was good. Operationally, cooperation between members and between districts was reported to be very good.

With regard to the question, “*Where do you see yourself, your district, and the town in the next 10 years?*” most participants expressed concern with the retention of younger members. This trend was thought to pose a threat to the long-term health of the emergency response system.

The members present at the focus groups appeared to be very committed and hoped to participate far into the future, but they expressed concerns for their future replacements. Some participants felt that some consolidation of districts was inevitable. There was concern that the town government could do more to help fire departments throughout the districts, such as helping to maintain and improve water supplies, improving inadequate infrastructure in some areas, and recognizing that increasing development posed challenges. There was wide agreement that the issue of recruiting and retaining volunteers was going to be difficult because of the time demands of training and increased mobility of young people.

The next question, “*Would you be willing to reduce the amount of apparatus your district has in order to provide more efficient service?*” turned to members’ willingness to consider changes to stations and apparatus in the town. Members participating in the focus groups generally stated that they were open to considering changes in this area, but any recommendations must be supported by data. There was concern about balancing insurance ratings against the need for specialized apparatus. The informal agreements between the districts that limit specialized apparatus was discussed—some newer members did not realize that these informal agreements were in place. Senior members were familiar with informal agreements dating to the 1970s. Since this time, the Selkirk Fire District purchased extrication equipment and a ladder apparatus, and the Delmar Fire District also purchased a ladder. Members appeared to be open to dispatching units from multiple stations, depending on the nature of the emergency and the property in question.

The final question, “*How important is departmental or station membership to your providing fire service to the town? Would you be willing to give up apparatus or move stations in order to deliver better service?*” inquired about the importance of members’ emotional attachment to their particular station and district. Members were generally attached to their stations and district identities but also expressed a willingness to consider changes for the good of the town. Lack of standardization was discussed as an issue for sharing staffing between the Delmar and Elsmere Fire Districts.

Overall, no major problems were identified during the course of the focus groups. Members felt that the current system provided a satisfactory level of service and that the districts work well together at incidents. Members agreed that maintaining existing and recruiting new members would be a challenge, and that there might be a need to consolidate as a means to maintain service in the future. These findings with regard to major themes were incorporated into the corresponding member surveys that were requested following these focus groups.

14.2 Member Survey

The next phase of measuring volunteers' opinions was to issue a member survey. A hard copy survey was mailed to each active member of the five districts. The surveys were mailed out in April and requested to be returned by May 1, 2011. Some 330 surveys were mailed out with a pre-addressed, stamped return envelope. The 25-question survey included several open-ended questions and was designed to be completed in roughly 15 minutes. Manitou, Inc. received 199 responses to the survey, a response rate of 59 percent, which is very good compared to efforts at other fire districts in the past. This response rate gives strong confidence that the survey results reflect the members' opinions. There were 48 respondents from the Delmar Fire District, 51 from the Elsmere Fire District, 17 from the Elmwood Park Fire District, 53 from the Selkirk Fire District, and 30 from the Slingerlands Fire District. The following paragraphs discuss the results of the member survey.

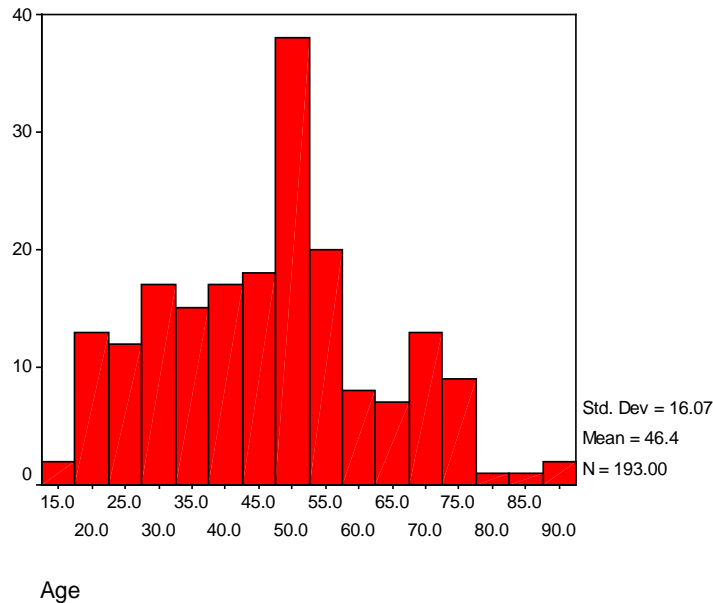
Residency

Ninety-one percent of all respondents to the survey indicated that they lived in the Town of Bethlehem, and 72.6 percent of the respondents indicated that they lived in the district with which they volunteered.

Age and Gender

The age of respondents to the survey ranged from 15 to 89 years old, with the average age being 46 years old. Figure 14.1 illustrates the distribution of ages of members. There were 19 female respondents, comprising 9.5 percent of all responses.

Figure 14.1: Age of respondents to the member survey



Years of Experience

Members responding to the survey had volunteer firefighting experience ranging from less than one year to over 26 years with their current departments. The survey questionnaire maxed out at 26 years or more, and 24 percent of respondents fit within this category. Table 14.1 shows the distribution of experience of respondents. Over 25 percent of respondents indicated they had less than five years of experience, suggesting a healthy intake of new members. Table 14.2 demonstrates total firefighting experience of the respondents with all departments they have served with. The higher amounts of experience demonstrated here seems to indicate that a large portion of the members came to their current departments already having experience elsewhere. Table 14.3 shows the number of years that respondents have served their individual districts; interestingly, the Delmar Fire District had a larger number of respondents with less than five years of experience. This may indicate that the Delmar Fire District has a strong recruitment program that may be able to be adapted for other districts.

Table 14.1: Years of experience with current department of survey participants

		Years			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0	1	.5	.5	.5
	< 1	8	4.0	4.0	4.5
	1-5	45	22.6	22.6	27.1
	6-10	36	18.1	18.1	45.2
	11-15	23	11.6	11.6	56.8
	16-20	19	9.5	9.5	66.3
	21-25	19	9.5	9.5	75.9
	26 or more	48	24.1	24.1	100.0
	Total	199	100.0	100.0	

Table 14.2: Experience of respondents in firefighting with all departments

		Years			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid		2	1.0	1.0	1.0
	0	1	.5	.5	1.5
	< 1	6	3.0	3.0	4.5
	1-5	38	19.1	19.1	23.6
	6-10	32	16.1	16.1	39.7
	11-15	26	13.1	13.1	52.8
	16-20	17	8.5	8.5	61.3
	21-25	22	11.1	11.1	72.4
	26 or more	55	27.6	27.6	100.0
	Total	199	100.0	100.0	

Table 14.3: Years of experience, by district

Years * District Crosstabulation

Count		District					Total
		Delmar	Elsmere	Elmwood Park	Selkirk	Slingerlands	
Years	< 1	5		1	2		8
	1-5	11	9	7	10	8	45
	6-10	15	7	3	7	4	36
	11-15	4	8	1	5	5	23
	16-20	3	5	1	6	4	19
	21-25	3	5		9	2	19
	26 or more	7	17	4	13	7	48
	0				1		1
Total		48	51	17	53	30	199

Employment and Response

Seventy-seven percent of survey respondents indicated that they were currently employed, and 20 percent of respondents indicated that they were retired. Of note is that over 13 percent of respondents work for the Town of Bethlehem, indicating that the town policy of allowing them to respond to calls from work is an important part of the departments' staffing. Also noteworthy is that the Elsmere Fire District has the largest number of respondents who respond from their place of employment. This may indicate that the Elsmere Fire Department's daytime staffing is more robust than that of other departments.

Table 14.4- Response from work, by district

Do you respond from work? * District Crosstabulation

Count		District					Total
		Delmar	Elsmere	Elmwood Park	Selkirk	Slingerlands	
Do you respond from work?	Blank	3	6	1	3	2	15
	Yes	8	14	1	11	8	42
	No	36	31	13	39	20	139
		1		2			3
Total		48	51	17	53	30	199

Motivations

In order to better understand why people join the fire departments in the study, Manitou, Inc. asked a series of questions that were designed to allow respondents to rank their reasons for joining their departments. Participants were asked to rank their primary, secondary, and tertiary

reasons for joining. Respondents were also asked similar questions about their reasons for remaining involved with the fire service.

The most common reason given for joining their fire department was “*I wanted to help people in times of a genuine emergency,*” an answer that 114 respondents (57 percent) chose as their primary reason for joining. Eighteen respondents (9 percent) listing this reason as their secondary reason for joining, and 23 respondents (11 percent) chose this reason as their tertiary reason for joining. The second most popular reason for joining given by respondents was “*I became a volunteer firefighter for personal reasons related to **family** being directly involved in firefighting,*” which was listed by 13 percent of respondents as their primary reason for joining, 8 percent as their secondary reason, and 5 percent as their tertiary reason. “*I have friends that participate,*” was another significant reason people listed for joining, indicating that a desire to help people and having family and friends involved is one of the strongest motivating factors for volunteers.

To gain insights as to how these motivations may change over time, over 59 percent of respondents indicated that their motivations had not changed over time. Thirty percent stated that their motivations had changed slightly, and around 10 percent indicated that their motivations had changed considerably over time.

To understand what keeps members volunteering, we asked a slightly different set of questions based on research by Thompson and Bono²³. The most common reason for continuing with their volunteer service was, “*I enjoy being part of my community*” (42.7 percent primary, 16.1 percent secondary, and 13.6 percent tertiary) followed by “*I enjoy the challenge of applying my skills/experience when volunteer firefighting*” (15.1 percent primary, 22.1 percent secondary, and 13.1 percent tertiary) and “*I feel like I am a strong contributing member of my firefighting team*” (14.6 percent primary, 14.6 percent secondary, and 10.1 percent tertiary). To gauge the importance of company experiences as it relates to the retention of members, we asked directly, “*how important is company membership to you?*” 66.8 percent of respondents indicated that it is “*very important,*” 23.6 percent indicated it was “*somewhat important,*” and nine percent of respondents marked “*not very important*” for company membership.

Risk Factors

The next section of the survey was designed to collect information on factors that threatened the participation of members. Respondents were asked to rate the top three reasons outside the department that came between them and volunteering. The number one constraint cited was “*work*” (48.2 percent listed as a primary concern, 9 percent as a secondary concern and 2.5 percent as a tertiary concern), followed by “*limited time due to family/home related responsibilities*” (23.1 percent listed as a primary concern, 24.1 percent as a secondary concern and 14.6 percent as a tertiary concern). The next most common concern was “*working too many hours,*” (6 percent listed as a primary concern, 16.1 percent as a secondary concern and 4 percent as a tertiary concern), which made work concerns by far the biggest threat to volunteerism.

Survey takers were then asked to rate the top three reasons inside the department that came between them and volunteering. The number one constraint was “*too many false alarms*” (24.1

²³ Thompson, Alexander and Barbara Bono. *Work Without Wages: The Motivation for Volunteer Firefighters*. American Journal of Economics and Sociology, 52(3), July 1993.

percent listed as a primary concern, 3.5 percent as a secondary concern and 3 percent as a tertiary concern), followed by “*company responsibilities*” (18.1 percent listed as a primary concern, 7.5 percent as a secondary concern and 4 percent as a tertiary concern). The next highest ranked consideration was “*training demands*” (13.6 percent listed as a primary concern, 21.6 percent as a secondary concern and 2.5 percent as a tertiary concern). This may indicate that improvements to dispatching criteria could go a long way towards alleviating some of the strain members of the departments feel.

The final question asked respondents to identify their concerns threatening their fire departments. The most common response was “*not enough volunteers*” with 38.7 percent of all respondents indicating they felt this way, followed by “*communications should be more two-way or open*” with 29.6 percent of the respondents feeling this way, and “*conflicts are not addressed openly*” with 28.6 percent of surveys. Only 22.1 percent of the survey respondents felt that they had no concerns for the future of their districts. The commentary on communications and conflicts indicate that training for members and officers in effective communication and conflict resolution techniques may be beneficial. Table 14.5 illustrates the breakdown of responses to this last question.

Table 14.5: Member survey respondent concerns for the future of their fire district

Concerns for the Future of the District	Number	Percent
I have no concerns	44	22.1
Communication should be more two-way or open	59	29.6
My input is not valued	44	22.1
My contribution/accomplishments are not recognized	27	13.6
Conflicts are not addressed openly	57	28.6
Conflicts are not addressed in a timely manner	37	18.6
Awards are distributed unevenly	17	8.5
New volunteer selection is not scrutinized enough	28	14.1
Shortage of officers	26	13.1
Inadequate financial resources	8	4
Not enough volunteers	77	38.7
Other reasons not listed above: _____ (please specify)	30	15.1

Analysis of Collaborative Planning Opinions

The next section of the survey asked respondents to rate whether they agreed or disagreed with five statements pertaining to the Town of Bethlehem’s fire services over the next ten years. Table 14.6 shows the questions as well as the number of responses. Survey respondents indicated they felt strongly that in ten years both their district and the volunteer system in Bethlehem would be strong. Respondents also strongly indicated that the districts needed to improve cooperation, even at the cost of consolidation of districts or stations. Interestingly, less than half of all respondents thought that service arrangements in the town could continue for the

next ten years without major change, even though in an earlier question they overwhelmingly suggested that the system would be strong. When the same question was posed regarding the fire districts, respondents were more likely to indicate that their district was doing well and could continue without major change. This discrepancy seems to indicate that most respondents feel that their districts are doing fine, but have concerns about other districts in the town.

Table 14.6: Member survey respondents’ attitudes toward the future

Agree	Disagree	Statement
125	65	In 10 years, the volunteer system in Bethlehem will be strong.
124	66	In 10 years, my district's volunteer participation will be strong.
123	63	The town's five fire districts needs to improve cooperation, even if it means reducing the amount of apparatus, moving or consolidating a fire station, and/or other resources.
86	98	The current arrangements in the town are working well and can continue for another ten years without major change.
108	80	The current operation of my district is working well and can continue for another ten years without major change.

The next section asked respondents about the level of importance they placed on membership in their districts. 69.3 percent of respondents felt that their district membership was “*highly important*” to them, while another 25.1 percent felt that it was “*somewhat important.*” Only 3.5 percent felt that their district membership was “*not very important.*” This illustrates how strongly survey respondents identify with their particular districts rather than with the Town of Bethlehem.

Respondents were then asked if their level of commitment would change if their district merged with another district. 47.2 percent of the respondents to this question were “*unsure*” if it would change their participation, and 36.7 percent of respondents felt that it would “*not change their level of participation at all.*” Only 8.5 percent felt that sharing stations “*would reduce their activity*” and 6 percent felt it “*would increase their activity.*”

The next series of questions asked respondents to rate their satisfaction in a number of areas regarding their district over the last year. These questions covered training, membership requirements, and whether or not members felt valued by the public for their service. Tables 14.7-11 illustrate a full breakdown of ratings by district. In three of the districts, over a quarter of all respondents did not feel that the public values their service. In those districts, particular attention may need to be paid to the way the department members interact with the community in order to find ways to build goodwill.

Table 14.7: Delmar Fire District member satisfaction responses

	Highly Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Not at all Satisfied	Not Applicable
Frequency of Technical Training	20 (41.6%)	24 (50%)	4 (8.3%)	0 (0%)
Quality of Training	20 (41.6%)	26 (54.2%)	2 (4.2%)	0 (0%)
Department/Station Requirements	12 (25%)	30 (62.5%)	5 (10.4%)	1 (2%)
District Requirements	11 (22.9%)	27 (56.3%)	5 (10.4%)	4 (8.3%)
Fire District valuing my service(s)	17 (35.4%)	26 (54.2%)	5 (10.4%)	0 (0%)
The public valuing my service(s)	16 (33.3%)	18 (37.5%)	13 (27.1%)	1 (2%)

Table 14.8: Elsmere Fire District member satisfaction responses

	Highly Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Not at all Satisfied	Not Applicable
Frequency of Technical Training	31 (60.8%)	18 (35.3%)	1 (2.0%)	0 (0%)
Quality of Training	29 (56.9%)	20 (39.2%)	1 (2.0%)	0 (0%)
Department/Station Requirements	27 (52.9%)	23 (45.1%)	1 (2.0%)	0 (0%)
District Requirements	25 (49%)	22 (43.1%)	3 (5.9%)	1 (2.0%)
Fire District valuing my service(s)	22 (43.1%)	22 (43.1%)	4 (7.8%)	0 (0%)
The public valuing my service(s)	17 (33.3%)	25 (49.0%)	4 (7.8%)	3 (5.9%)

Table 14.9: Elmwood Park Fire District member satisfaction responses

	Highly Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Not at all Satisfied	Not Applicable
Frequency of Technical Training	7 (41.2%)	8 (47.1%)	0 (0%)	2 (11.8%)
Quality of Training	9 (52.9%)	7 (41.2%)	0 (0%)	1 (5.9%)
Department/Station Requirements	8 (47.1%)	8 (47.1%)	0 (0%)	1 (5.9%)
District Requirements	10 (58.8%)	6 (35.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (5.9%)
Fire District valuing my service(s)	7 (41.2%)	5 (29.4%)	4 (23.5%)	1 (5.9%)
The public valuing my service(s)	7 (41.2%)	5 (29.4%)	4 (23.5%)	1 (5.9%)

Table 14.10: Selkirk Fire District member satisfaction responses

	Highly Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Not at all Satisfied	Not Applicable
Frequency of Technical Training	16 (30.2%)	26 (49.1%)	7 (13.2%)	2 (3.8%)
Quality of Training	15 (28.3%)	29 (54.7%)	8 (15.1%)	0 (0%)
Department/Station Requirements	11 (20.8%)	30 (56.6%)	9 (17%)	2 (3.8%)
District Requirements	11 (20.8%)	25 (47.2%)	15 (28.3%)	1 (1.9%)
Fire District valuing my service(s)	15 (28.3%)	22 (41.5%)	12 (22.6%)	4 (7.5%)
The public valuing my service(s)	13 (24.5%)	23 (43.4%)	13 (24.5%)	4 (7.5%)

Table 14.11: Slingerlands Fire District member satisfaction responses

	Highly Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Not at all Satisfied	Not Applicable
Frequency of Technical Training	16 (53.3%)	9 (30%)	4 (13.3%)	0 (0%)
Quality of Training	15 (50%)	12 (40%)	3 (10%)	0 (0%)
Department/Station Requirements	15 (50%)	13 (43.3%)	2 (6.7%)	0 (0%)
District Requirements	14 (46.7%)	12 (40%)	2 (6.7%)	1 (3.3%)
Fire District valuing my service(s)	16 (53.3%)	11 (36.7%)	3 (10%)	0 (0%)
The public valuing my service(s)	13 (43.3%)	12 (40%)	5 (16.7%)	0 (0%)

The final section of questionnaire was designed to help understand the relationships between the departments in the Town of Bethlehem and used a scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* for five questions. The results are presented below in Table 14.12. Overall, most respondents felt that relations between the districts were generally good, more so on emergency scenes than with administrative manners. Nearly 77 percent of respondents saw a continuing role for themselves with the town's fire service. This is a positive indicator for the future participation of volunteers. The appendix contains a copy of the survey form with responses summarized.

Table 14.12: Member survey responses to inter- and intra-departmental attitudes

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
At emergency scenes, relations between firefighters of different districts are generally good.	56 (28.1%)	104 (52.3%)	25 (12.6%)	9 (4.5%)	2 (1%)
At non-emergency scenes and administrative matters, relations between firefighters of different districts are generally good.	22 (11.1%)	89 (44.7%)	62 (31.2%)	23 (11.6%)	0 (0%)
Relations between districts are positive.	19 (9.5%)	70 (35.2%)	72 (36.2%)	33 (16.6%)	2 (1%)
Relations between my district's officers and firefighters are positive.	51 (25.6%)	83 (41.7%)	33 (16.6%)	18 (9%)	11 (5.5%)
I see a continuing role for myself in the future of the town's fire service.	84 (42.2%)	69 (34.7%)	23 (11.6%)	10 (5%)	7 (3.5%)

Note: Not all figures add to 100 percent; some respondents left answers blank.

These findings are worthy of further study and may warrant some follow-up polling as potential consolidations of facilities are considered in the future.

15.0 Citizen Survey

As part of the study, the Task Force decided to survey the public in order to get an understanding of the public's opinions and thoughts regarding fire protection. This survey was designed to be brief and offer the ability to assess satisfaction with quality and cost of services, as well as gather general sentiment on shared services and opportunities for improved service delivery. The survey, which consisted of 12 questions, included an open comment section at the end of the survey. For reasons of efficiency and cost effectiveness, the task force decided to issue this survey electronically, using a web-based survey, in order to avoid printing and postage costs. The survey was issued in late July and remained active until August 8, 2011.

A press release was sent to the Spotlight News and Altamont Enterprise with the custom domain of <http://firestudy.net>, an address which was chosen to be easily used and remembered. With the cooperation of the Town of Bethlehem, Town of Guilderland, and Town of New Scotland, links to the survey were also posted on government websites. These links directed users directly to the online survey. The fire districts with websites also posted a link to the online survey.

Finally, the survey was announced to electronic subscribers to the Town of Bethlehem newsletter. An email was sent to everyone on the town's e-mailing list. The responses to the survey came primarily from the Bethlehem email list, followed by direct entry to firestudy.net, and then from links from town or fire district websites. These tracking data were obtained by using unique addresses for the various venues that provided links to the survey.

A total of 302 responses to the citizen survey were received, representing both individuals and businesses. The survey limited responses to one respondent per IP address in order to prevent individuals from responding more than once. However, the survey permitted respondents to indicate multiple participants for households and businesses. Based on the data collected, Manitou, Inc. estimates that at least 789 people were represented by the responses. The open-ended question at the end of the survey received 102 responses.

Participants were asked to indicate which fire district they lived in—only 4 percent (12) responses indicated that they were not sure. The respondents were from: Elsmere (28.1%); Delmar (26.5%); Selkirk (24.2%); Slingerlands (12.9%); and Elwood Park (4.3 percent).

One survey question asked respondents to list whether their fire service was provided by paid, volunteer, or a combination of providers. This question was designed to assess people's basic knowledge about the fire service in their District. Only 5 percent of respondents believed that a combination of paid and volunteer firefighter positions were used; and 8.9 percent of respondents didn't know. Although there is a possibility that paid EMS personnel may have confused the question, this indicates that over ten percent of the residents do not know how the staffing for their service is provided. This suggests a need for continued outreach and education of the public.

Of the respondents, 30 percent had called on the services of the fire department. Of those that did, the overwhelming majority (85%) were *satisfied* or *highly satisfied* with the response time. With regard to their professionalism, over 94 percent were *satisfied* or *highly satisfied*. This is a

very high level of satisfaction and indicates that the job performance by the firefighters is valued by the people that call on the districts. As we see from the following question, people with experience calling the fire services have a higher opinion of their services than the public at large.

The citizen survey then asked respondents about their perceptions of response time and professionalism. Results indicated that over 61 percent were *satisfied* or *highly satisfied* that their fire district could respond in a timely fashion and 62 percent were *satisfied* with the professionalism of their fire district. This indicates good support, but there is a missed opportunity to show the public how well services are perceived by those with experience in using them.

In terms of financial or administrative issues, citizens are slightly less enthusiastic about the fire districts. Fifty-seven percent of respondents were *satisfied* with the value for cost of services provided by their district. Interestingly, 17 percent of respondents indicated that they “*did not know*” if they were getting value for their investments in fire service.

To assess the loyalty of the public for receiving service, we asked if respondents cared from which district their service came. Seventy-three percent agreed *somewhat* or *completely* with the statement that “*I don’t care what district my service comes from, as long as it is timely and professionally delivered.*” This suggests that residents are open to greater cooperation in service provision.

The final set of questions concerned support for collaboration between the Town’s fire districts. Almost 90 percent of respondents supported consolidation if it saved money. The citizen survey then attempted to measure the strength of that support with some questions on possible tradeoffs that might occur in some cooperative scenarios. When asked if they would support a reduction in fire apparatus at their local station, almost 70 percent of respondents indicated that they did.

The study also examined the insurance rating implications of possible changes. When asked if they would support increased collaboration even if it meant a possible increase in property insurance premiums, the percentage of residents supporting change fell to 34 percent, with almost 52 percent disagreeing somewhat or completely with that statement.

A final check on the validity of the data asked if a member of the household answering the survey was a member of a volunteer fire department. Just under 20 percent of respondents (56) indicated that they had a household connection to the volunteer fire service. We examined the differences in attitudes between volunteer households and others and found general agreement between the two, indicating that there was no bias in the survey through participation of volunteers or their families.

15.1 Comments Section, Citizen Survey

The comments in the citizen survey were generally supportive of the volunteers, even when they were less positive about finances, organization, or quality of service, as illustrated in Table 15.1.

Many of the comments could be broken into two thematic areas: service and finances. Comments were further classified by whether they were generally positive toward fire services or negative. The most frequent comments were split between general support for the volunteers and support of consolidation.

There were several comments pointing out the perception that there were too many chief’s cars in the Town, which was undoubtedly influenced by recent press coverage of fire services in nearby Colonie.²⁴ While many comments were supportive of consolidation, a few comments indicated concern that pursuit of cost savings should not jeopardize the current level of service.

Table 15.1: Overall summary of citizen survey comments

Tone/Theme	Positive	Negative
Services	25	14
Finances	4	33

An analysis of the free-form comments for the two dominant themes showed that the perceptions of service levels and appreciation for volunteers was positive (25 comments). However, the comments related to finances were overwhelmingly negative. This shows that citizens can differentiate between the volunteer firefighters and the system under which they work.

To summarize, the public has a positive perception of the timeliness and professionalism of the fire services. The public is open to greater collaboration and supportive of changes, especially if they can result in cost savings. Support weakens considerably when the possibility of tradeoffs in insurance ratings (and their possible effect on insurance rates) are mentioned.

For a complete copy of the survey results, see the Appendix.

²⁴ O’Brien, Tim. “One Town, 35 Chiefs.” Times-Union. May 9, 2011.