



Galax Fire and Rescue

First In, Last Out: Efficiency, Sustainability, and Effectiveness of a Volunteer Fire Service



“We are one of the last all volunteer fire stations in the area..”



“... and we want to keep it that way,” stated Chief David Hankley proudly as the Consulting Team wrote rapidly in their notebooks. At first glance, you could see that these were not your average trainees seated in the City of Galax Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service (GFRS) training room; this was a group of student consultants from Radford University’s Political Science Department.

Galax, Virginia is a small city located on the border of Grayson and Carroll Counties. Established in 1906, the furniture and textile industries were booming in the City of Galax due to the availability of lumber nearby.

Unfortunately, once outsourcing of manufacturing industries began to take over, those businesses all but disappeared, leaving a quiet, small town of around 7,000 residents. The residents of the surrounding counties easily double that of the city.

The Galax Fire Department was founded in 1912 as an all-volunteer force and has remained that way up to today. The culture of this volunteer organization was built and preserved over many decades. All of the men are very passionate about the bonds they have created and are not willing to sacrifice the community of service that has persisted throughout the years.



This is symbolized the ethos: “first in, last out” – the firefighters rush to get to the scene first and they remain until everyone else is out of danger. Unfortunately, *they may not be able to remain all-volunteer much longer* if two problems persist. One is a declining volunteerism rate and the other is the rising costs of maintaining a highly-functioning fire department.

There are many reasons for the falling volunteerism rates: the rise in two-income families (less time to spend on volunteer activities), increasing training requirements for the certification of volunteer firefighters, and the decreased availability to answer fire calls during the work day for most volunteers. With the march of technology, and rising costs of training and equipment maintenance, the budget needed to run a fire department has risen gradually over the years. All of

these elements lead to endemic and escalating problems in maintaining an all-volunteer fire department.



As the GFRS grapples with these long-standing issues, David Hankley, Chief of GFRS, decided it was time to bring in some external expertise. The Chief wrote an email to several nearby universities asking for technical assistance in addressing these strategic

issues head-on. Radford University was the only school to respond to this call for assistance. Dr. Tay Keong Tan of the Department of Political Science responded by doing a preliminary assessment of the situation at the Galax Fire Station in mid-July 2015. After appraising the problems, he formed a team of student consultants and assigned a Graduate Assistant, Katie Littleton, to the consultancy project. The student team consisted of four students of a course in Public Administration (POSC 300) in the Fall Semester of 2015: Connor Fetridge, Kyle Ruskin, Cindel Strickland, and Tyler Wygal. Generous funding support for the project was offered by the Scholar Citizen Initiative at Radford University to pay for the consultants' expenses. In addition, the University's Center of Innovative Teaching and Learning also provided ideas for curriculum design and teaching strategies to help the student consultants undertake challenging service-learning assignments such as this.

Equipped with this new knowledge, the student consultant team began work by a field visit to the fire station. They spent a weekend at the station, learning the tasks the volunteers undertake daily, attending to fire calls, and assessing the problems of the department with in-depth interviews with Chief Hankley and his key officers. They conducted a literature review and studies of other fire departments and comparable organizations.



To address the problems of declining volunteerism, rising costs, and the imperative to keep the firefighter's ethos and service culture of GFRS alive, *four options were developed and evaluated*: (1) move to a 100% career fire service; (2) evolve into a combination department (with both paid and volunteer firefighters); (3) remaining a 100% volunteer fire service; and (4) create a hybrid department of volunteer firefighters and paid administrative positions.

Options	Cost Efficiency	Sustainability	Effectiveness
100% Paid Department	LOW	HIGH	HIGH
Combination	MEDIUM	LOW	HIGH
100% Volunteer Service	HIGH	LOW	HIGH
Hybrid	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH

This last option was developed by the consulting team as a hybrid of the previous three. This option advocates the introduction of a few non-firefighter paid staff to work alongside the volunteer firefighters and operational staff.

The selected paid positions are essential posts to the running of a modern fire department: (1) a recruitment and training officer (with administrative duties); (2) a station and equipment maintenance officer; and (3) a certified public accountant to handle accounting and bookkeeping responsibilities. The team also proposed that these positions be implemented in phases over three years, and that the department partially pay for them through fundraising activities.

The four options were analyzed and ranked according to three important criteria that matter the most to the Fire Department's stakeholders: (1) Cost efficiency (important to the City

Management); (2) Sustainability (a strategic goal of the Chief and his officers); and (3) Effectiveness (critical to the community, especially during a disaster or incident.) An analysis of these four options is summarized in the table above. The consultants strongly recommended the last option (the Hybrid) as the chosen course of action for the Galax Fire Department.

With this analysis, the consultant team drafted a final report and presented it to their client. Both the report and presentation were rigorously vetted in forums such as a Scholar-Citizen Symposium in Radford University on October 23, 2015; and a half-day retreat on November 7, 2015, held off campus at the Selu Conservancy.

On December 3, 2015, the students presented their final report to the Fire Chief David Hankley; Fire Captain Mike Ayers; Galax City Manager Keith Barker; and the City's Vice Mayor, Willie Greene during an hour-long session. Witnessing this formal presentation were Dr. Kate Hawkins, Dean of the College of Humanities and Behavioral Sciences; Dr. Paige Tan, Chairperson of the Political Science Department; Mr. Charley Cosmato, Director of the Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning and RU staff members and students.



The City Manager and the Fire Chief both heartily accepted the key recommendations of the student consultants and requested additional data to inform the City Council's decisions and the implementation. They called the students' solutions "innovative" and "out of the box." At the end of the meeting, the student consultants demonstrated their commitment to their client organization by agreeing to conduct further research to gather data to better inform the budget decisions of the Galax's City Council. The student consultant

team was invited by the Mayor and City Manager to present their recommendations to the Galax City Council during a budget meeting on February 8, 2016. They accepted it with pride.