



A Brief Consideration of Cuts to Municipal Fire Protection: Considering the Relationship between Fire Protection, Municipal Obligation, and the Value of Life

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Introduction

Municipal fire departments continue to deal with uncertain financial times. They continue to face pressure from policy makers and legislative bodies to reduce spending. In some lucky cases the reductions mean that service levels continue to at least resemble what they once were, i.e., three instead of four firefighters on each piece of apparatus and sometimes it means closed doors on fire stations.

This discussion is primarily limited to municipal fire departments for three basic reasons. First the rural fire service has always done a lot with a little and they make very different cost analysis because they face very different resource challenges. Second, it is the big metropolitan areas where there is an unspoken expectation that when something bad happens an agent of the government (in this case the fire department) will quickly come to

make things right. Third, the function of the local volunteer fire department is obviously an example of civil society as distinguished from the forced governmental structures of paid municipal fire departments. Arguably the volunteer service provides the greater civil good because the locality extends to it more directly the measure of worth it wants the organization to have and further can more directly alter the nature and content of the service provided by the organization.

The municipal fire service in this county is fast approaching the point where there is no more fat to trim; where you have already made all of the meaningless concessions and still more is required. It is reaching that point where only the really tough questions remain, like what is the nature and extent of the obligation of government to provide fire protection to its citizens and the corollary: given the continued pressure to reduce costs what does it mean to provide fire protection?

In the end this discussion asks many more questions than it answers. By examining the role of fire protection as a function of civil society, challenging core notions of what it means to provide and fire service, and highlighting the nature of personal risk assessment this discussion seeks simpler truths. One simple truth is that after all the rhetoric is done for the day, the people in the most basic democratic of ways should decide just what it is worth to them to have a fire engine,

or ambulance come when they call 911. From this determined worth they can and will necessarily derive what it is that they are willing to pay, both in terms of taxes, levies, fees, and/or service reduction, to get the fire department that they want.

Fire Protection as a Function of Civil Society

There are many things that a government is obliged to provide. We expect that they will provide for the things like the common defense on a national level. On the local level we expect that we will also be provided with some sort of police protection, education, public health (with EMS being a subset of public health) and fire protection, among other things. Is the expectation of fire protection a fundamental function of municipal government?

Lynn Harvey argues, "Providing fire protection is generally considered a basic service function of township government. In some cases, it represents the single largest expenditure category in the township budget. [1] Arguably fire protection, police protection, trash collection, public health and education (among other things) are services that citizens expect from government.

Public education is comparable to fire protection in that it is also provided by government, the majority of the funding is tax funding and, "Public education is inclusive, both in its treatment of students and in that enfranchisement for the government of public education is as broad as for government generally. [2] Municipal fire protection is not however

completely like public education in that, "Public education is often organized and operated to be a deliberate model of the civil community in which it functions." [2]

From a historical perspective the deliberate model civil community model makes sense for fire protection as well. Volunteer fire companies were natural outgrowths of civil society. Neighbors recognized a need for fire protection and organized local fire companies to serve that need. Because the local fire company was manned by local people it was naturally aware of and responsive to the peculiar needs of the local community. According to the Firemark website, "The reality is that fire companies operated in a local area, and were organized and existed because of donations from citizens and businesses or public funding. Volunteer fire companies were prominent social organizations and membership was an honor." [3]

Because these volunteer organizations were local they were in tune with local forces, priorities and politics. In other words the people had the fire department they needed if not by deliberation then by evolution. But as the responsibility for providing fire protection shifted from the volunteer only to combined or fully paid departments the organizations slowly but surely became increasingly detached from the communities they purported to serve. Fire protection became less and less a function of civil society and instead a forced function of local government.

This is apparent in many ways, not the least of which is the number of paid firefighters who live hours away from the public they serve. What that means is that unlike the civil society model of citizens serving themselves and protecting themselves, fire protection became yet another function of the welfare state. With this detachment came not only an alteration to the meaning of fire protection but also a shift in the interaction between the government providing the service and the people receiving it.

Does government have an obligation to provide fire protection? Yes, it does because urban society demands a level of co-dependency. As Adam Ferguson noted, civil society arises when production moves out of the household and strangers become dependent on each other.” [4] In the modern urban center civil society has yielded to co-dependency. It is simply not possible for people to provide the service themselves and without fire protection there is a real and present danger of a fire disaster. It is important to qualify the obligation. The argument here is not that government has to staff fire departments to support “aggressive interior attacks.” Such things are not meaningful to citizens. What is meaningful is that the fire department can make reasonable efforts at saving people trapped by flames and prevent disastrous or catastrophic economic loss secondary to conflagrations. In other words no one really cares that Mrs. Smith’s house burned down. That is not a disaster. Having an entire city

block of houses burn down is and that is what people expect the fire department to prevent.

There are limits to the obligation? Government is not obliged to put a fire engine at the end of every long country lane with a continuous water supply within six minutes of call receipt just because it can do that in urban areas of the same jurisdiction? The obvious answer is no. When people move out of urban centers into suburban and rural areas their expectations for municipal fire protection must drop accordingly.

But as much as people should expect a drop in service they should also not be treated as “customers.” Over the course of the late 20th century many municipal fire departments jumped on the band wagon of total quality management and other customer service based business models in a purported effort to improve service. The vacuity of this approach is now becoming clear. If the fire service- and by default the municipal government- is engaging in a business to customer relationship with the taxpayer there is no obligation to provide service much like Starbucks is not obligated to keep a store open in an economically depressed area that is not generating revenue. Now imagine an economically depressed area that no longer receives fire, police or ambulance service because they can’t pay for it. The customer service model does not work for fire protection simply because government exists to protect the citizens not to profit from them.



What does it mean to Provide Fire Protection?

A new custom ladder truck with paint and equipment costs at least \$800,000.

If you add staffing on a 48 hour rotating work week you can expect a low end figure of \$100, 000 additional per year in staffing costs per person. This leaves a total cost of more than one million dollars for this one ladder truck. What if we instead invested just 25% of those one million dollars in increased public education and smoke detector installations?

Even with a fire engine on every corner always available with a pressurized water supply and staffed with four “aggressive interior firefighters,” Grandmother Jones will be fighting losing odds when her house catches on fire. It is the obligation of government to fight fires or isn’t it also the obligation of government to prevent fires? If we claim to serve the citizen the nobler goal is to prevent the fire.

Fire protection has grown to mean many things, including the provision of emergency medical care, but at its root it is still a culture that values fighting fires. This community is steeped in bravado because it is in many ways the last frontier, short of war, for young men and women to prove their mettle in. Society needs those men and women. Grandmother Jones deserves to have someone willing to risk everything to pull her from a fire, but

not at the exclusion of preventing the fire and not at all costs.

What does it mean to provide fire protection? Really?

Professional fire educator Bill Delany makes a brilliant point, “We are, however, eerily quiet when it comes to public educators and other “prevention” components of our service when they get cut. Why is this? Well, for me, it is because we DO have a culture of extinguishment...The culture of extinguishment is more than alive and well... “[5]

Protection from bodily harm means that the body is not harmed. Protection from fire means that the fire department arrives after the fire is burning and puts it out.

Personal Risk Assessment

One of the more common arguments used in public debate is that if we close a fire station, people will die. Is that true and if it is, does human life have an infinite value? For the “people will die”- argument to be true it must also be true that for any given Fire Station X there can be assigned a value of lives saved [N]. For simplicity lets say that N is calculated by taking the total number of fires in the area of fire station X for which fire station X was in quarters and not engaged on some other emergency and for which it is possible to say that, “... that but for that fire station this person would have died in that fire.”

Assume that for Fire Station 999 the true record of its actions in 2009 was

that there were 20 actual fires in its area that required fire department intervention and for which the fire engine from Fire Station 999 was in quarters. Of these 20 fires there was one where if Grandmother Jones had been left inside for another minute more she surely would have died. Using those parameters the value of N for Station 999 in 2009 would be 1. In the public discourse of the relative costs of closing that station we could reasonably say that if we close that station we have the increased exposure of one additional life lost per annum in fires in the geographical area covered by Station 999. If we take this example even further we can say that if it costs 1 million dollars per year to operate Station 999 we are paying 1 million dollars per year to save a single life.

Of course the example is simplistic; there are many other factors to consider, not the least of which is the ability of Fire Station 999 to provide rapid medical care to persons in crisis. (However, I don't need a big fire engine to provide medical care; I can provide that with two guys in a pick up truck.) Also it is not true to say that just because the value for N is 1 this year that it will not be higher or lower next year. So we stick solely to the issue of fire protection and are back to the question that it costs 1 million dollars a year to produce a single life saved.

There are going to be two main arguments against what I say here. The first will say that it is immoral to place a dollar figure on the value of single human life-that human life has

infinite value. If this were the case no one would argue against a tax increase to provide universal health care, which would arguably save more lives in any one state in a given year than all the fire department in the country combined. There is something more at work here.

We assign a value to human life all day. Consider the following argument, "As for the ethics of it, I feel perfectly justified in spending several thousand dollars for medical treatment of a dog or a horse I own, even though I wouldn't consider doing so for any of the millions of people who "need" it more. Money, after all, represents the distilled life of the person who earned it. And if life has any value, then people should be at ethical liberty to spend it as they wish. [6] or consider that, "The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) uses a value of statistical life (VSL) estimate to express the benefits of mortality risk reductions in monetary terms for use in benefit cost analyses of its rules and regulations." [7] I could go on to your insurance coverage, the value of your IRA and the cost of your home. Our society has placed a price on the value of human life and it would seem that this does not bother us until we stop to consider it.

It turns out that we do not process the risk of disaster (and fire is a disaster) using such cold terms:

Usually people think in binary terms: either something will happen or it won't. So when people hear they have a 6 in 100,000 chance of dying from a fall, they shelve that risk under the label, "won't happen to me," even though falling is in fact the third most common cause of accidental deaths in the

United States (after car crashes and poisoning). It would be much more powerful to tell people about Grant Sheal, age three, who fell and cut himself on a vase while playing at home in February 2007. The toddler dies from his injuries. Or about Patryk Rzezawski, nineteen, who fell down and hit his head that same month while walking near his home. He was pronounced dead at the scene. These deaths are almost always described in news account as "freak accidents," despite the fact that they are relatively common. [8]

How people conceive of their relative danger has nothing to do with numbers but everything to do with narratives. All it takes is for one person to know one person who died in a fire for all the numbers to become meaningless. This simple fact is why it is so hard to close fire stations.

The second argument against me is that I am in essence arguing for the elimination of fire department jobs. I am not. I like to think things through but don't believe for a second that I am talking myself out of a job. I do think that the fire service needs to reconsider what it is that they are to do with the resources that have been entrusted to them by the public. It is becoming increasingly clear that while the incidence of fires are down, the age of the population is on the rise and both the frequency and severity of disasters is on the rise. The need for public safety has never been greater, while at the same time the need for so many big ladder trucks and million dollar fire engines has never been smaller.

Government must not only make clear the limits of their ability to prevent and protect they must also

educate people, working to alter perceptions and expectations about the capabilities of government. Altering those expectations will not be easy. As noted by Wachtendorf and Tierney:

Frequently, even those community members who were somewhat educated about the need to mitigate against disasters seemed to mistakenly believe that, if there were any additional steps that could have been taken to make the community safer, those steps would already have been taken by their local government officials. In other words, many community residents may think that if safety measures have not been undertaken, it is because such measures will not really make a difference. As one Project Impact coordinator put it:

People think, 'Well if it's an important thing to do, certainly my city would require my builder to build my house better....' There's an assumption that government does that.... That [assumption] was a big surprise to us. We hadn't realized how entrenched that was [in the minds of community members.] [8]

Somehow despite all the logic, somehow despite what seems to make so much sense, it still feels wrong for a community to lose a fire station. It is a violation, whether it makes sense or not, because there is a certain level of mental security that comes from knowing that when you see a fire and call 911 someone will be there in a few short seconds.

Part of living in a modern municipal community is the assurance of fire protection. No one really cares that how the firefighters put the fire out. You don't see news stories with civilians lamenting the exterior attack. You don't see Grandmother Jones wondering why the firefighters squirted water through the windows.

What the citizens care about is what they complain about and what they complain about is when it takes “too long for someone to get there” and when they are treated poorly.

Conclusions

Much of what is written here will be misread, or worse yet taken out of context. Unions will decry that I am calling for additional job loss and my fellow firefighters will argue that I am pushing for a world of exterior attacks. Neither of those things is true. What is true is that, as I have said many times before, the American Municipal fire service is out on a rocky cantilevered precipice on an icy, rainy night. One wrong move and the fire service becomes irrelevant. This is not because the fire service is no longer needed. Society still requires a fire service; however it requires a fire service that is nimble, responsive to local need and more importantly able to engage in open and honest discourse about what it means to provide fire prevention and protection. It also needs a fire service that is willing to explore and engage in new mission taskings that are in line with the needs of the society that it claims to support and not marching along some dogmatic line buried in lore and out of touch with the very citizens it claims to protect.

There is no way to fully explore these ideas in a few short pages. But I hope that, if nothing else, it is clear that the status quo is no longer the answer. We have to ask better questions.

References

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