



# A SEAMLESS MERGER

## Kansas cities expand capacity of fire services

By Andy Graham

### **It was meant to be and the time was right.**

The merger of the fire departments of Merriam and Overland Park, two close-in suburbs on the Kansas side of the Kansas City region, would lead to enhanced community service and more than 1.5 million dollars in savings over time.

Overland Park needed additional coverage in parts of the city, and Merriam wanted to enhance its advanced life support (ALS) capabilities to be more efficient when responding to an increase in medical calls. Merriam's proximity would solve Overland Park's problem, and Overland Park's extensive ALS capabilities would help Merriam address its needs.

Managers for both cities knew this would be a major undertaking and wanted to make sure conditions were favorable to receive maximum benefit. "There might not have been anything too groundbreaking about this whole

thing, but the way our two city managers worked together was unique. They both stepped in and up," said Overland Park Fire Chief Bryan Dehner.

#### **Motivation for Merger**

Nearly 80 percent of all emergency calls in Merriam are medically related due mostly to an aging population. The city, however, didn't have the equipment or trained squad to appropriately respond to calls. A big fire truck with flashing lights and several firefighters would show up, while alarmed neighbors stood in their front yards looking for a fire.

"It was expensive and inefficient for us to send 100,000 pounds of equipment and six guys in bunker gear out whenever someone fell out of their chair," said Merriam City Administrator Phil Lammers. "But even a small squad and sports utility vehicle would have been too expensive."

In 2013, the Overland Park Fire Department (OPFD) paid another area fire department \$452,900 for services in a one-square-mile area in the northern part of the city and another larger area in the eastern part of the city. They were looking for cost savings, as well as a more reciprocal relationship.

#### **The Right Timing**

Bob Pape, now a Merriam city councilmember, retired from the Merriam Fire Department in 2014 as its chief following 38 years of service. When he was promoted to the top spot and his dual role of fire marshal in 2009, he'd hit the pension ceiling and announced

that he would retire in five years. Pape's impending retirement created new opportunities for a Merriam-OPFD merger, including ample time to plan.

Without senior positions to fill, the city would save considerable money in salaries and be in a better position to explore new management structures prior to Pape's retirement. Also, Pape's strong leadership and trust from his staff of 20 firefighters and the community would be valuable assets during the transition.

"We had to make sure Bob was comfortable," Overland Park City Manager Bill Ebel said. "He was initially concerned about maintaining his department's standards and that the Merriam community, as well as his guys, were in good hands."

Pape began his career as a volunteer firefighter in the mid-70s, when the job was much different. In addition to the increase in medical calls, firefighters now respond if someone is trapped—almost anywhere, not just in a car—for technical rescue, hazardous materials, and a variety of other incidents.

These specialized skill sets require training that OPFD provides in-house and for a reduced cost, training that would benefit Merriam's residents and its fire capabilities. "We had to do what's best for Merriam," Pape said. "When an opportunity like this comes along that makes you better and less expensive, you're morally obligated to do it."

In 2013, the contracts OPFD had with another fire district for the north and east parts of the city were about to expire, and negotiations on a long-term agreement stalled over service provisions. Specifically, Overland Park wanted the ALS it provided in these areas to be consistent with services in the rest of the city, so as to ensure public safety equity for all residents.

Once it became apparent that the OPFD would need to look for another partner with the capacity to support its objectives, Merriam emerged; the city also wanted an ALS squad and to improve its medical response capabilities. It seemed that both cities wanted the same

things, and at a time when conditions were optimal for a management reconfiguration in Merriam.

"At that point, we needed each other's capacity and began conversations about how we could move forward," Lammers said.

### Long History of Collaboration

Cities in Johnson County, where Merriam and Overland Park are located, frequently interact and work efficiently on issues that transcend jurisdictional boundaries. So when the two cities got serious about merging their fire departments, they were already familiar partners with a long history of collaboration.

"People have been talking about doing this for decades," Dehner said. "It just took the right people at the right time to make it happen."

Leaders from both cities were sensitive to the "people factor" and culture, and the impact it would have on Merriam's group. **They also didn't want anyone to worry about losing jobs, pay or benefits.**

While Lammers and Ebel were the key architects of the merger, staff members from each city were tasked with ironing out the many operational, logistical, financial, and administrative details. Chief Dehner recalls that it was obvious both managers were of like minds, had a shared vision, and an incredible amount of trust in their staffs to make it happen.

"Once Bill and I saw the big picture and gave marching orders, it all fell into place," Lammers said. "We knew it was all very complicated, but the benefits to both sides would be worth it."

"The timing of a switch is important to consider for issues like employee medical insurance, sick leave, and vacation," added Merriam Finance Director Cindy Ehart. "It is also important [for staff] to be flexible with the smaller administrative details once the larger issues have been resolved."

Key staff included Chiefs Dehner and Pape, who already had a strong working relationship and spoke the same language; and OPFD's Deputy Chief of Administrative Services Kim Nemitz and Ehart, who had more of a learning curve in efforts to make it all work out on paper.

"Kim and the OP staff were very helpful from the start," Ehart said. "While 'fire language' is pretty similar across cities, some issues regarding scheduling and overtime are unique to fire departments

in general and required that I become educated. Kim was always open and honest in all aspects of the process."

Overland Park, the second-largest city in Kansas with more than 187,000 residents, works with nearby communities on several joint ventures related to public works projects and snow removal, among other efforts. But this was a much more intensive venture.

"This is the largest-scale shared services initiative I've been a part of," Ebel said. "I see this as a major accomplishment for the city."

## People and Culture

Fire departments offer unique challenges not present in other areas of a municipal organization or seen in more typical transactions. In addition to the usual bevy of moving parts and budgetary concerns, expensive specialty equipment, deeply ingrained protocol, and proprietary training regimens, managers also must account for intangible cultural factors that bring with them a host of unforeseen issues.

Merriam's 21 fire department employees would become part of the OPFD — the larger department with 150 firefighters, plus 10 civilian at seven stations. OPFD offers high levels of training and specialized services not available in Merriam, as well as more opportunities for career advancement.

Firefighters are a tightly knit bunch, often bound by pride in the department's tradition and the unique patches on their uniforms. They work long hours together and depend on each other in dangerous situations, which fosters a camaraderie not typically found among staff in 9-5 office jobs.

Leaders from both cities were sensitive to the "people factor" and culture, and the impact it would have on Merriam's group. They also didn't want anyone to worry about losing jobs, pay, or benefits.

"There was a normal level of anxiety and I got some flack. Some thought I was giving away the fire department," Pape said. "But I wasn't going to let my guys get demotions, and for the most part the community got behind us."

Pape and Dehner were especially concerned about managing culture, morale, and rumors, and made transparency and open communication a top priority. Chief Dehner personally addressed any questions or rumors that emerged and Pape didn't have much trouble convincing his firefighters that this was a good thing.

"We heard some buzz at first, so we talked about it and focused on communicating the positives of growing and improving," Dehner said. "They lost their patch and we were mindful of that, but we managed it with communication."

As it turns out, Merriam experienced significant turnover in recent years and OPFD was a highly desired career destination for many of its firefighters. According to Pape, Merriam had become a training ground for other departments. So Merriam firefighters quickly got on board and embraced the change.

"The biggest thing about the transition was making sure we still had our jobs. You're talking about the families and livelihood of 21 guys," said Captain Kenny Mikulich who fought fires in Merriam for 28 years and still works out of the same station, but in a truck bearing an OPFD insignia. "There really wasn't any heartache, growing pain or friction. The chiefs were extremely transparent, and that really helped."

To start the transition, Overland Park Fire Chief Dehner sent an ALS squad of three fire medics to Merriam, which proved a successful strategy. They immediately formed good working relationships with their Merriam counterparts and were able to squash any rumors or misinformation in the station.

"That was the secret sauce," Dehner said. "The three guys sent up there could have made or broken the whole thing. If they didn't get along or calm any anxiety that existed, who knows what would have happened?"

### Benefits for All

After a successful honeymoon transition period during the first three quarters of 2014 to test the waters, OPFD and Merriam inked a 10-year contract to continue the relationship in 2015. No firefighters lost their jobs, and the mountain of financial and benefits details have mostly been worked out. With both sides reaping the service and financial benefits of the merger, personnel are now fully integrated under one patch.

"Nobody goes backwards, and most everybody goes forward at least a little bit," Lammers said. "It's pretty hard not to like."

Merriam officials estimate the merger will save half a million dollars over 10 years. Overland Park fire officials

estimate the city will save more than \$120,000 per year in various contract costs related to coverage in north Overland Park.

The merger with OPFD expanded capabilities in the areas of training and public education, which were significant enough for Merriam to earn an increased Insurance Services Office (ISO) Rating from ISO 2 to ISO 1 in February 2016. ISO ratings are considered one of the most reliable measures of community safety, and the achievement could result in insurance premium savings for residents and business owners.

Merriam's ability to expand a high level of service across the north and east areas of Overland Park helped achieve high marks during a recent credentialing process. The Merriam community continues to enjoy the benefits of ALS services in the community.

"Now the firefighters and community know that this was a very good thing," said Pape. "Staff assimilated very well and the community recognizes the benefits of ALS and improved response times."

Most of the Merriam firefighters still work out of the same station, but there are more backup support opportunities from OPFD when someone goes on leave or needs to spend time training. According to Mikulich, the Merriam house is a popular place to be with its upgraded kitchen and other amenities.

And due to the scale of OPFD's operation, there are many more specialty areas and advanced career paths for members of the (former) Merriam team to pursue. Already, at least one is receiving training in the prevention area with hopes of one day becoming fire marshal.

Ebel says this is the ultimate measure of success. "I would define success as promoting someone from Merriam and moving them somewhere else in Overland Park," he said. **PM**

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