

Joint-administrative consolidation strengthens Rock Falls and Sterling fire departments

By Phillip Sitter

(Published online at <http://bit.ly/1dIhmXj>, Sauk Valley Red Tail, October 23, 2013)

The Rock Falls and Sterling city councils have approved a joint-administrative consolidation between the two cities' fire departments which will save both cities money and create more consistent cross-community emergency capabilities once the agreement takes effect September 28.

The agreement will make current Sterling Fire Chief and Rock Falls Deputy Fire Chief Gary Cook chief of the Sterling and Rock Falls departments. Each city will also have a new deputy fire chief upon their respective promotions – Captain Bill Milby in Rock Falls and Captain Mike Dettman in Sterling. The cost of the joint administration will be split 61 percent for Sterling and 39 percent for Rock Falls, based on population.

“Official promotions won’t have happened yet [as of Saturday, September 28],” said Bill Wescott, Chair of the Rock Falls City Council Police and Fire Committee and Mayor of Rock Falls. Promotions will happen at the following city council meetings in Sterling – “October 7” – and Rock Falls – “October 1,” Wescott explained.

Under previously established auto and mutual-aid agreements, the two fire departments have already been working together in practice for some time. The departments have been training and operating as one for eight or nine years, Wescott highlighted. Under the auto-aid agreement, 911 calls with certain information trigger a response from both Sterling and Rock Falls, Wescott explained.

A 2012 Matrix consulting study convinced the cities to make their cooperation more formal. “The study, paid by Sterling ... strongly urged consideration to consolidate

administrative duties. Rock Falls will save \$45,000 a year, and Sterling \$70,000,” Wescott highlighted.

The consolidation lets the departments “concentrate on saving taxpayers dollars,” and it will “benefit both cities down the road,” similarly explained Captain Mike Dettman, soon-to-be deputy chief in Sterling.

“One of the biggest benefits down the road will be replacing equipment. We’ll look at joint purchase,” said Bill Wescott. The same equipment often “show[s] up at the same fire scene anyway,” he added.

Members of both the Rock Falls and Sterling fire departments also believe that the new administrative consolidation will improve cross-community emergency capabilities on different fronts.

“With all three of the administration working together on both sides of the river, some of the stuff we do is going to start being more consistent, not that we’re horribly different now, but I think everything will start being more in line with each other ... SOGs (Standard Operating Guidelines)...training, [the] way we handle calls,” thought Captain Dave Northcutt of the Rock Falls department.

“We’ll work a little closer, probably in our training scheduling ... we’ve done some, but we’ll probably go to a higher level of communication,” said Chief Gary Cook. The new deputy chiefs in each city “will cross community lines and work on both sides [on] prevention, inspections,” Cook added. “We have a lot of good things we’ll continue to build on,” he closed.

For others, it is still too early to evaluate the promised successes of the administrative consolidation. “It remains to be seen if [the administrative consolidation] is a good thing,” stated

Glen Kuhlemier, Rock Falls City Councilman of the Second Ward. “But I have implicit faith in Chief Cook to do a good job,” Kuhlemier said.

“I haven’t read enough about it to know the pros and cons,” explained Nancy Carrell, citizen of Sterling, on her opinion of the administrative consolidation. “I think it’s about economics, money, so I don’t know if that’s good or bad,” she said.