

REPORT BRIEF

EVOLVING POSSIBILITIES

*Fire and EMS service sharing options
in Somers, Bristol, and Paris*



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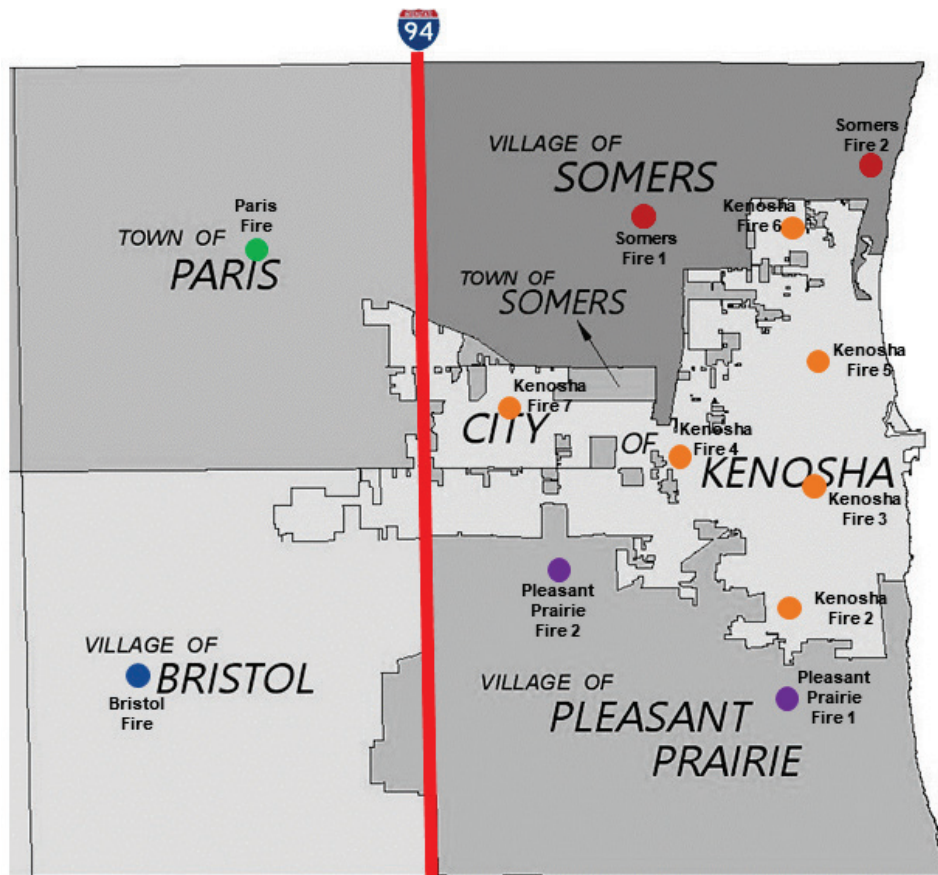
In the spring of 2018, officials from the Town and Village of Somers, the Village of Bristol, and the Town of Paris asked the Wisconsin Policy Forum to analyze potential options for fire and emergency medical services (EMS) consolidation or enhanced service sharing among their three municipalities. The rationale for exploring such options included challenges with current staffing models; a desire for enhanced EMS service levels; and increased service demands resulting from new residential and commercial development and increased traffic on I-94.

The study was conducted with the participation of the administrators from Somers and Bristol, an elected representative from Paris, and the three fire chiefs. It is important to note that its purpose was not to recommend a specific consolidation approach and implementation plan, but to develop a range of potential options for decision-makers to consider.

EXISTING FIRE AND EMS SERVICES

Somers, Bristol, and Paris are located in southeastern Wisconsin surrounding the City of Kenosha and the Village of Pleasant Prairie. The map below shows the location of fire stations in the region. The need for two stations in Somers stems primarily from the higher population density on its east side, which is separated by two sets of railroad tracks from Somers Station 1.

Location of fire stations in the study area



Each of the three fire departments has a different staffing model:

- Somers employs nine career firefighters but also staffs some of its shifts with hourly firefighters, referred to as Paid on Premises (POP) staff. Its typical shift has two to three firefighters at each station, with an average of 4.25 at any one time across the two stations.
- Bristol does not employ career firefighters itself, but staffs one of its shifts with career firefighters through a contract with Metro Ambulance and also employs 15 part-time firefighters. Its typical shift has two firefighters who are either contracted or POP.
- Paris does not employ career firefighters. Instead, it staffs one 10-hour shift during the day with two hourly POP employees, while at night one POP firefighter is on duty.

While the departments differ in how they staff regular shifts, all three rely, to varying degrees, on hourly POP or Paid on Call (POC) staff as a way to manage shift staffing and operations. (POC staff are hourly employees who are called in and work only when necessary.) The table below shows staffing levels for the three departments, converting their various staff into full-time equivalents (FTEs).

Full-time equivalent fire department employees, 2017

	Village of Bristol	Town of Paris	Village/Town of Somers	Total
Fire Chief	1.00	0.50	1.00	2.50
FF/Paramedic/EMT	3.00		13.14	16.14
POP Shift Staffing	2.64	2.76	1.48	6.88
POC	2.45	0.85	0.44	3.75
Total FTE	9.09	4.11	16.07	29.27

Source: Fire departments in Somers, Bristol, and Paris; WPF calculations

Annual expenditures for fire/EMS protection by the three municipalities total about \$2.4 million. Somers accounts for about \$1.4 million of that total, with Bristol spending about \$740,000 and Paris about \$282,000.

Our analysis finds that the current fire/EMS model meets the needs of residents and businesses in the area with adequate response times. However, there are some vulnerabilities going forward, particularly in light of anticipated growth.

For example, one consideration with regard to continued heavy reliance on hourly staff is that such reliance may increase response times when compared to having regular shift staffing. In addition, all three departments report that recruitment and retention of POP/POC staff is an issue and is expected to get more difficult in the future. Consequently, both Bristol and Somers have expressed a desire to move further in the direction of career departments.



SERVICE SHARING/CONSOLIDATION OPTIONS

Our analysis models multiple scenarios for future fire and EMS service sharing among the three communities. Those include three near-term scenarios that would be appropriate to consider if policymakers do not wish to pursue significant increases in staffing levels; and several longer-term scenarios that policymakers may need to consider given projected increases in call volume associated with new development. These longer-term scenarios include some in which the three departments would consolidate into one, and others involving only two of the three departments. The eight scenarios are summarized in the box below.

NEAR-TERM SERVICE SHARING OPTIONS	
Scenario 1a: Regional EMS	Somers and Bristol jointly provide EMS service in Paris, but Paris retains POC staffing model for first response and fire calls.
Scenario 1b: Full Consolidation with a Small Increase in Staffing	The three departments consolidate into one with 8 shifts, including 7 staffed exclusively with career firefighters.
Scenario 1c: Full Consolidation, Small Increase but Contract Staffing	Mirrors all of the assumptions of Scenario 1b but substitutes contract employees for municipal firefighters.
LONGER-TERM SERVICE SHARING OPTIONS	
Scenario 2a: Full Consolidation with Larger Increase in Staffing	The three departments consolidate into one with 10 shifts, including 9 staffed exclusively with career firefighters.
Scenario 2b: Full Consolidation, Larger Increase but Contract Staffing	Mirrors all of the assumptions of Scenario 2a but substitutes contract employees for municipal firefighters.
OTHER SERVICE SHARING OPTION	
Scenario 3a: Somers Provides Fire/EMS Services in Paris	Somers adds third station west of Station 1 and contracts to serve Paris using that station.
Scenario 3b: Paris Provides Fire/EMS Services in West Somers	Paris increases staffing at its station and contracts with Somers to serve western part of village.
Scenario 3c: Bristol Provides Fire/EMS Services in Paris	Bristol increases staffing at its station and contracts to serve Paris.

NEAR-TERM SERVICE SHARING OPTIONS

Scenario 1a: Bristol and Somers Provide EMS Service, Paris Retains Hourly Staffing for Fires

Scenario 1a is an enhanced service sharing approach in which Somers and Bristol would jointly provide Basic Life Support (BLS) and Advanced Life Support (ALS) service in Paris under a contractual arrangement, but Paris would retain a POC staffing model for first response and fire calls. This is the most basic and simplest scenario we considered; it is based on a premise that there may be a benefit to having Somers and Bristol, which currently assist with or handle many of the EMS calls in Paris because of their advanced capabilities, provide that service under a formal agreement with Paris.



This approach recognizes that the vast majority of service calls in Paris are related to EMS. At the same time, Paris has an investment in its own independent fire suppression capability and a desire to maintain its department. Because the scenario assumes Bristol and Somers could formally agree to provide BLS and ALS service in Paris with *current* staffing levels – and that Paris would be able to reduce its shift staffing and retain only its chief position and 0.85 FTE in POC staffing – there is a reduction in cost for this scenario (from the current combined \$2.3 million to \$2.1 million).

Scenario 1b: Full Consolidation with a Small Increase in Staffing

Under Scenario 1b, the three departments would consolidate into one as a means of improving coordination, providing a small increase in shift staffing, and moving towards a staffing model of primarily career firefighters. The premise is that, even without a desire to significantly increase staffing and service levels, the three communities may wish to join forces to grapple collectively with the need to replace a POP/POC staffing model with a career firefighter model.

This scenario assumes a total of 8.0 shifts, a slight increase in shift staffing from the current 7.05 shifts. The more significant difference is that this scenario models seven shifts staffed with career firefighters and only one with POP. We estimate that the consolidated department would require 26.53 career FTEs, an increase of 10.39 FTEs (costing approximately \$1.1 million) over current career and contract staff. Overall, the estimated \$3.2 million annual cost associated with this scenario (net of revenues) exceeds that of the current service delivery model by about \$1.0 million.

Scenario 1c: Consolidation with Contract Staffing

This scenario mirrors all of the assumptions of Scenario 1b except that it substitutes contract employees for municipal firefighters. Municipal employees still would be used for relatively limited POP and POC staffing. The net total annual cost of this scenario is \$2.5 million. That is about \$250,000 more than current combined net expenditures but about \$720,000 less than the cost of the previous basic consolidation scenario using municipal firefighters/paramedics.

Potential advantages of achieving consolidation with contracted fire and paramedic staff include significantly reduced human resources challenges and responsibilities for the three departments and the potential for reduced costs related to employee benefits, vacation, etc. On the other hand, some of the chiefs expressed concern about potential disadvantages associated with reliance on contract employees, who may not be as familiar with the local community and as personally vested in its well-being. Also, while outsourcing may lower costs, it may present disadvantages in terms of control of service levels, hiring, training, succession planning, etc.

The table below summarizes the staffing and fiscal estimates for the three scenarios described above and compares them with current staffing and expenses.

Summary of near-term scenarios

	Current	Scenario 1a	Scenario 1b	Scenario 1c
Shift Staffing	7.05	6.13	8.00	8.00
Total FTE	26.77	24.01	33.58	28.05
Net Expense	\$2,259,641	\$2,095,221	\$3,223,528	\$2,508,761



LONGER-TERM SERVICE SHARING OPTIONS

In light of anticipated new development and population growth, expenditure levels are likely to change significantly in the future even if the three municipalities continue to provide fire/EMS services independently. Consequently, to be able to compare our longer-term sharing and consolidation scenarios to a future state of enhanced staffing levels, we developed a Future Baseline model. The model assumes Somers will need to add two shifts and Bristol one shift to accommodate added demand for service. We estimate that Somers' net fire/EMS costs would grow by about \$670,000 annually in today's dollars, while Bristol's would grow by about \$320,000.

Scenario 2a: Consolidation with Municipal Firefighters, Limited POP

This scenario assumes a fully consolidated department that serves the three municipalities, but with a higher level of shift coverage than shown under the near-term consolidation scenarios. Ten firefighters would be on duty at all times across the four stations, as compared to the current average of 7.05. We assume three-person shifts at each of the Somers stations, and two-person shifts at the Bristol and Paris stations.

Our analysis finds that if the expansion to 10 shifts for a consolidated department made limited use of POP staff (for one of the 10 shifts) and instead used a largely career firefighter staffing model, then 18 additional full-time firefighters would be needed (for a total of 34 FTEs). The total annual net cost would reach \$4.0 million, which is roughly \$650,000 higher than the Future Baseline and \$800,000 higher than the more modest consolidation scenario presented earlier (Scenario 1b).

Scenario 2b: Contract Firefighters Plus One Shift of POP

This scenario incorporates the same assumptions as Scenario 2a (i.e. 10 shifts for a consolidated department), but substitutes contract staff for municipal employees. This reduces the cost of this scenario by about \$900,000 from Scenario 2a, and also places it below the estimated cost of the Future Baseline scenario by about \$250,000. Of course, the same caveats apply as for Scenario 1c – the actual cost of contracting would depend on negotiations with a selected vendor, and it is uncertain whether a contracted service model would be effective and/or palatable.

Overall, our analysis of Scenario 2 models shows that if the communities collectively wish to secure a significant increase in coverage under a consolidated approach, then the added annual cost would be in the \$800,000 to \$1.8 million range, depending on the method of staffing. For Bristol and Somers, their share of the increased cost under Scenario 2b is comparable to our estimate of future costs without any service sharing. For Paris, costs under these consolidation options may not increase at all, but that would depend on how increased regional costs are allocated.

Summary of longer-term scenarios

	Current	Future Baseline	Scenario 2a	Scenario 2b
Shift Staffing	7.05	10.05	10	10
Total FTE	26.77	38.14	41.16	34.05
Net Expense	\$2,259,641	\$3,356,393	\$4,020,921	\$3,097,046



OTHER SERVICE SHARING OPTIONS

Consolidation of the three departments could produce improved coordination of fire and EMS response, a better ability to compete with neighboring communities for staff, and the opportunity to grapple with increased service demands on a united basis. However, the geographical barriers – including the distance between Somers and Bristol and the location of the freeway – limit the potential to achieve operational improvements from a three-way consolidation.

It is logical to ask, therefore, whether it would be more appropriate to consider scenarios in which one (or both) of the two larger communities simply assumes responsibility for fire and EMS services for the smaller Town of Paris on a contractual basis. Ostensibly, such scenarios not only could provide Paris with an enhanced level of fire and EMS service, but they also could benefit Somers or Bristol by helping them to defray costs associated with service expansion via the new source of revenue they would receive from Paris. We also look at an option in which Paris maintains its independence while helping Somers respond to its increased growth.

Scenario 3a: Somers Provides Fire/EMS Services in Paris

Given the high level of anticipated growth in the northwestern portion of Somers, the Somers fire chief has noted that a third station west of Station 1 is likely to be needed at some point in the future. That station, assuming that it is located west of the interstate, ostensibly would be able to service Paris. Under this scenario, Paris could eliminate its department and contract with Somers for EMS and/or fire response. Another option would be for Somers to respond to EMS calls in Paris while Paris retains its POC program for structure fires and larger incidents.

We estimate that adding and staffing a third station – and moving to three shifts at each station – would cost Somers up to \$2.2 million more than the \$1.2 million it is paying for fire and EMS today. However, Somers eventually may have little choice but to pursue such expansion, and using this as an opportunity to contractually serve Paris could help defray a portion of the added cost.

The key question is whether Paris would derive sufficient benefit to wish to engage in such a collaboration. It appears that Paris may be able to secure an enhancement in fire and EMS service via a contractual arrangement with Somers given that it would be served by a western Somers station that would be staffed with three shifts of career firefighters on a 24/7 basis. There may be an additional cost, but that cost could be relatively small depending on the cost allocation methodology.

Scenario 3b: Paris Provides Fire/EMS Services in West Somers

Under an alternative two-way service sharing arrangement, Somers would add staff to its existing stations per our original Future Baseline, but instead of constructing a new station, it would lean on Paris to increase to two shifts and respond to calls in western Somers. Total shift staffing is eight, as we assume the two Somers stations would have shifts of three. The estimated annual combined cost would be \$2.7 million, which is \$300,000 to \$750,000 lower than the previous scenario under which Somers would build a third station, albeit with reduced total shift staffing.

We assume an additional annual cost for Paris of \$450,000 for its enhanced staffing, which would need to be shared with Somers. It is worth noting that even if Somers funded the entire increased

cost to Paris, that subsidy would be substantially less than the cost of staffing its own new station. Of course, Somers officials also might feel that they could better serve the western portion of their community with their own new station, as opposed to a contractual arrangement with Paris.

Scenario 3c: Bristol Provides Fire/EMS Services in Paris

Another option would be for Bristol to take over coverage of Paris under a contractual arrangement. This scenario assumes that Bristol would provide such coverage with its current single station but add one additional shift. The net expense is lower than the current combined spending of the Bristol and Paris departments and lower than Future Baseline because it is assumed that the Paris department would disband, with those savings fully offsetting the cost of the added shift in Bristol.

This approach would allow Bristol to defray the cost of expanding shift staffing to three, which is what would be required eventually under the Future Baseline. One concern is that the area covered by Bristol would double, which could affect average response times. However, the low call volume in Paris means that Bristol would also likely realize some benefit from additional shift staffing.

The benefit to Paris of this approach is difficult to quantify, however. During the day, when EMTs currently are on duty in Paris, it is likely that response times under this scenario would be longer since the response would come from the Bristol station (although at times when Paris has no shift staffing, this scenario could improve service). A bottom line concern is whether Bristol could provide sufficient coverage to Paris even with the additional shift given the geographic distance between the Bristol stations and parts of Paris.

CONCLUSION

Most of the options presented in this report would produce increased costs for fire/EMS services in the region. Those increased costs, however, are not a byproduct of sharing or consolidation, but result from assumptions that 1) shift staffing will need to increase as call volume increases with new development; and 2) Somers and Bristol will need to move from a model that depends on hourly staffing to more of a career model over time.

While each of the three municipalities likely faces increased fire and EMS costs in the future regardless of whether they seek to share or consolidate services, our modeling suggests that Somers and Bristol may be able to reduce anticipated Future Baseline cost increases by pursuing intergovernmental cooperation. Paris would be unlikely to see reduced costs, but may be able to add a level of fire and EMS service staffed by full-time, career firefighters that it may desire and otherwise would not be able to achieve on its own.

Overall, this report is intended to be instructive to policymakers in the three communities by identifying and broadly analyzing a series of options that may help them grapple with challenges involving their fire/EMS staffing models and increased service demands. Pursuing any of these options will require considerable additional fiscal and programmatic analysis, as well as negotiation regarding cost allocation. It is our hope, however, that by laying out the costs and benefits of several options, we have provided elected officials and administrators with a data-driven framework they can use to consider and determine next steps.