

Frequently Asked Questions regarding a potential consolidation of the Peotone Fire Protection District and the Manhattan Fire Protection District

What does it mean to consolidate two fire protection districts?

Generally speaking, government agencies that are seeking to consolidate with one another do so in order to reduce unnecessary spending, streamline operations, focus on service delivery and generate significant cost savings to taxpayers.

Taxpayers ordinarily favor government consolidations because they eliminate bloat and wasteful spending, reduce the overall size of government, and provide for longer term financial stability during economically challenging times.

Fire protection districts in the region and throughout the country face an uncertain future due to significant challenges related to funding, staffing, population changes and the need to adapt to the economic conditions in the communities they serve.

Considering future growth in the area, an overall increase in the demand for services and current staffing challenges due to a reliance on part-time personnel, the two districts have determined that consolidating is a sustainable way to deliver top quality services in the region while also reducing the burden on taxpayers.

If a measure to consolidate the two districts were approved by voters, the two districts would merge into one. They would have one board of trustees, one command staff and one administrative team. They would also have a full complement of trained, experienced full-time firefighters and paramedics.

Why consolidate? Why now?

Consolidation is an opportunity to ensure that both Peotone and Manhattan's fire protection services remain on sound financial and operational footing over the long term.

Without consolidation, residents in Peotone may, over the next five to ten-year period, be forced to choose between tax increases or a diminished level of service.

And without a consolidation, the Manhattan Fire Protection District will need to determine how to deliver and pay for a consistent level of staffing and coverage amid an increasing demand for services as the region's population—and calls for service—increase.

What needs to happen in order for the two Districts to consolidate?

A referendum calling for the consolidation needs to be placed on the ballot in a future election. Then, a majority of eligible voters would need to vote in favor of consolidation.

Ultimately, the decision of whether the two fire protection districts should consolidate is not up to the districts, their boards or their command staff. It is up to voters.

Is there going to be a vote on this consolidation in the June 2022 election?

Maybe. In order for the question of consolidation to be put before voters in the next election, residents of Peotone would have to put forth an effort to place a referendum on the ballot.

While both the Manhattan Fire Protection District and the Peotone Fire Protection district have announced that they believe consolidation is a good idea that can deliver significant benefits to both communities, neither one is permitted by law to get directly involved in the process of placing a referendum on the ballot.

Therefore, any measure to consolidate the two districts must come from the citizens of Peotone.

What's in it for Peotone residents?

Following a consolidation, Peotone residents will receive better service and be taxed at a lower rate. A portion of Peotone homeowners' property taxes funds fire protection services. If the two Districts consolidate, the rate at which Peotone residents will be taxed for fire protection services will decline, saving the owner of a home valued at \$250,000 between \$70 and \$90 annually.

Also, the costs of not consolidating could be far greater for Peotone residents. That's because budget growth in Peotone over the next five to ten years does not support the ability to implement more stable, full-time staffing models, renovate dated facilities, invest in modern equipment, or keep up with regional growth without seeking tax increases—which may not even be an option.

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What's in it for Manhattan residents?

Manhattan residents will receive better service due to a substantial increase in full-time staffing in addition to investments in new and modernized fleet & facilities over the next five to ten years.

Also, a consolidation would ensure the district's financial sustainability for 5-10 years and also allow for the fire service to keep up with an increase in population and a 40 percent increase in call volume compared to 2020.

From a resident's perspective, what will be different under a consolidation?

Providing critical public safety, fire, rescue, and emergency medical services to their respective communities is the districts' mission. If the two districts consolidate, their ability to deliver those services proficiently and professionally increases significantly. Here's why:

- A consolidation would allow for the hiring of nine full time firefighter/paramedics. Those men and women's sole focus every day will be serving Peotone and Manhattan. A district that employs mostly full-time employees is better suited to provide full coverage than a district that relies on a part-time shift staffing model where it can be very challenging to keep staffing levels where they belong consistently.
- A consolidation will eliminate unnecessary and duplicative administrative costs. Dollars saved can be reinvested in full-time personnel, ongoing training, equipment modernization and maintenance, etc.

The bottom line is that residents of Peotone and Manhattan deserve and expect that critical public safety, fire, rescue and emergency medical services be delivered effectively, promptly, professionally and affordably. Under a consolidation, that expectation will be met in a consistent and sustainable way for decades to come.

Why has fully staffing fire protection districts become such a challenge?

Fire protection districts throughout the region and the country are facing very serious personnel challenges since many rely heavily on hiring part-time personnel on a shift-by-shift basis. This staffing model may have served districts well over the years, but due to the changing employment landscape, it no longer does.

Increasingly, fully trained, and certified firefighters and paramedics are no longer available for part-time shift work because they now prefer higher-paid full-time opportunities. So, finding part time shift personnel is therefore growing ever more difficult.

A consolidation of the two Districts would allow for a more reliable, stable, and sustainable staffing model that depends on full time personnel whose sole focus is on serving the Peotone and Manhattan communities.

Aren't the two Districts already consolidated in some ways & why can't we keep doing the IGA?

In a sense, yes. An informal and incomplete consolidation has already taken place in the form of a shared services agreement between the two districts that was enacted last fall. Under the agreement, the Manhattan FPD provides all administrative support (facilities/fleet/equipment management, human resources, payroll, benefits, etc.) for the Peotone FPD.

The shared services agreement has already delivered results in the form of enhanced emergency medical services, response capabilities and training programs. By sharing resources between the two districts, the partnership has generated approximately \$600,000 in cost recovery and savings and has led to a more streamlined budget process.

Even though the shared services agreement has been successful, neither District can realize the full financial, administrative, and operational benefits without a consolidation. In order to hire nine full-time firefighter/paramedics and maintain a five to ten-year financial sustainability plan, a full consolidation must take place.

If there is a consolidation, what will the district be called?

The Fire District will be called the Manhattan Fire Protection District. In the event of a consolidation, the Peotone station will maintain its name and identify. Additionally, vehicles and apparatus serving Peotone would maintain the Peotone logo and identity as we fully understand the pride and appreciation Peotone residents have for the men and women who work every day to ensure their safety.

Will the new board of trustees be composed of equal representation from Peotone and Manhattan?

First, it is vital to point out that, a board representing a consolidated fire protection district must serve in the interest of *all* the residents in *every* community within that district.

Individual board members, regardless of where they reside, have the responsibility to act solely in the interest of what is best for the *entire district* and not in the self-interest of one community or another.

A board representing a consolidated district will be duty-bound to act in the best interest of the *entire district*.

Following consolidations, we envision creating a seven-person board whose representatives will include Peotone *and* Manhattan residents. We would recommend to Will County that two Peotone board members immediately join the consolidated board, and that one more Peotone resident will be added to the board through attrition.

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