

# SHARED STATIONS: GOOD IDEA OR BEST PRACTICE?

By Tom Rinaldi, Association of Fire Districts of the State of New York President

Several years ago, two fire departments in Saratoga County floated the idea of a joint fire station. As in every department, there were those who claimed it would never work, but it has.

Round Lake Hose Co. is a village department that contracts for fire protection in adjacent areas, specifically the Town of Ballston and the Town of Malta. The Malta Ridge Fire Department is a fire protection district that contracts for fire protection in the Town of Malta.

Both departments had two stations, one of which had become outdated for current fire department operations. Both departments had main stations in the heart of their respective coverage areas. The idea developed to build a shared fire station on the border of the two departments, in the heart of Malta which was quickly developing, this idea was also in harmony with a recommendation from a fire protection master plan prepared for the town.

How would the shared station become a reality? Questions such as who would own the station, how payments would be made, who would maintain the station and, most of all, what kind of human resource issues would develop at a station shared by two fire companies arose.

Financially, the Planning Committee came up with a viable solution: Form a separate not for profit organization to build, make payments on and manage the fire station. The governance organization which managed the finances, the building and day to day management of the station is made up of a Board of Directors composed of three members from each of the fire companies.

Known as Fire Companies of Malta or FCOM, the not-for-profit is responsible for the fiscal, as well as physical management, of the building. Both fire companies pay approximately \$225,000 from their budgets for rent to finance the cost of the building. Studies indicated that the shared station concept would save \$4 million over the next decade by eliminating the duplication of services.

The station location would also cut down on response time since many of the members came from nearby subdivisions. As part of the study for the new shared facility, it was found that a

station staffed by both fire companies would provide the best fire protection coverage to the rapidly growing town center.

The building was designed and built with future expansion and uses in mind. The building has four drive-through bays, and a separate PPE storage area to avoid vehicle exhaust contamination. Other rooms include a radio room, standby room, three offices, conference room and an unfinished mezzanine for possible conversion to living space if career firefighters are needed in the future.

Each fire company has placed apparatus in the building and has gradually evolved to shared staffing during calls especially the weekday hours when staffing is limited. Most recently, both fire companies have agreed to a Monday through Friday, 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. mutual aid plan, where members from both departments may find themselves staffing a single piece of apparatus during the daytime response period.

Living together under one roof has encouraged the departments to train together at least once a month. Malta Ridge Chief George Downs remarked, "For smaller departments or ones with a limited budget, this would seem to be the thing to do to save taxpayer money."

Operational examples of mutual cooperation include a recent call where the Round Lake Hose Co. was dispatched for a working trailer fire. Malta Ridge was also dispatched as daytime mutual aid.

Round Lake members arrived at the shared station with a small crew but no driver. Malta Ridge had a driver and one crew member. By combining the crews, the Malta Ridge engine responded to the scene and quickly knocked down the fire with sufficient staffing.

Another instance of shared resources occurred when the Malta Ridge Fire Co. was toned out along with Round Lake Hose Co. as daytime mutual aid to a confirmed working fire at one of the Town parks. Malta Ridge was the first engine out with three members from Malta Ridge and two members from Round Lake fire filling out the crew on the truck. Although the fire was extinguished with a water can, it's another example of two fire companies working together under the same roof.

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